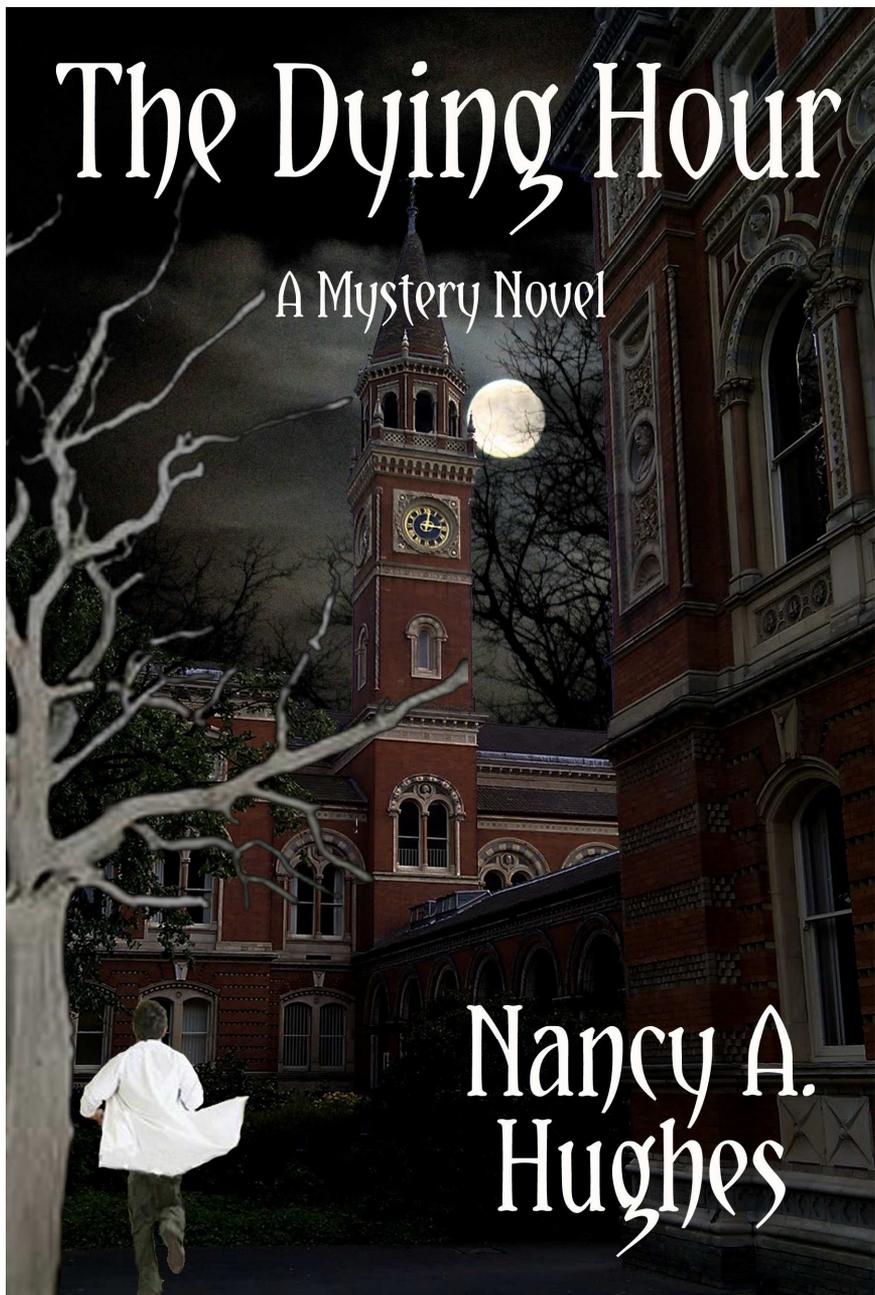


The Dying Hour

A Mystery Novel

Nancy A.
Hughes



Surely he had heard wrong. The child couldn't have said what Charlie thought he did, could he...

Jonathan rested his cheek on Charlie's chest, his head facing the foot of the bed. The child's warmth penetrated Charlie's shirt, his hair smelling of baby shampoo. Their first conversation—the moment was magical. A slender thread was knitting their bond. The child spoke, his little voice barely audible. "I miss Gram, too."

Charlie stroked the little guy's head, barely touching its silky strands.

Then Jonathan uttered a few shocking words. Charlie was sure he'd misunderstood, but something in the child's trembling confession told him otherwise. Charlie was terrified of breaking the spell by asking him to repeat what he'd said, but he could not resist.

"Jonathan. Look at me." The child didn't move. "Please. I didn't catch what you said, and I want to know what's troubling you. Perhaps I can help."

Before Charlie could process a suitable follow-up, Jonathan eased from the bed and, without looking back, trudged from the room.

Stunned, Charlie raised himself onto his elbow. He waited. Nothing. Jonathan did not return.

Charlie could have sworn that Jonathan said, "I killed Gram."

He glanced toward Bill Kelly, but the old man appeared to be sound asleep. Charlie lowered his head back onto the pillow, attempting to process the fragile implication of what he'd just heard. Surely, he had misunderstood. How could a small child—

And yet—what could he make of such a confession? He hadn't a clue.

Vietnam vet and VA hospice patient, Charlie Alderfer, has survived a medical catastrophe, only to discover that he faces three final battles—an inoperable aneurysm lurks in his chest; a mute and despondent five-year-old visitor harbors a terrible secret and needs compassionate help; and a nocturnal intruder is murdering Charlie's roommates, one by one. When Charlie reports that they did not die of natural causes, no one believes him, labeling him *confused*. But when the five-year-old boy finally tells Charlie his secret, the former soldier quickly realizes that the death of this boy's grandmother and the death of the terminally ill roommates could be related. Is there really a serial killer roaming the halls of VA hospices, preying on defenseless old veterans? And if so, how can Charlie stop him? Using himself as bait, Charlie faces certain death, but if there's one thing he learned in the army, it's that "freedom isn't free."

KUDOS for *The Dying Hour*

In *The Dying Hour* by Nancy A. Hughes, Charlie Alderfer is a patient in a VA hospice center recovering from surgery on an aneurism. As Charlie's terminally ill roommates start dying, one by one, Charlie happens to witness one's murder and quickly realizes that what he saw was not a dream. His roommates did not die of natural causes as everyone thinks they did. But when Charlie tells his doctor about it, he suddenly starts being sedated and given some kind of strange drugs. But Charlie is no fool. He palms the pills, instead of swallowing them, and sends them off to a private lab, discovering that the pills are lethal. When he confronts the doctor, and they begin to investigate, all hell breaks loose. Armed with an eye-witness in the form of a five-year-old boy who watched his grandmother's murder, Charlie is determined to stop this killer from preying on defenseless elderly patients. The story is a page turner and Hughes's character development is superb. The plot is strong with enough twists and turns to keep you biting your nails all the way through. ~ *Taylor Jones, Reviewer*

The Dying Hour by Nancy Hughes is the story of a man and a little boy, both of whom witness separate murders by what appears to be the same serial killer. Five-year-old Jonathan Murdock hid in the closet when the Angel of Death came to take his gram to heaven, but instead of taking her, the angel left her dead on the floor, and poor little Jonathan thinks it's his fault that the angel didn't take her to heaven. Charlie Alderfer is a patient at the same VA hospice where Jonathan's grandpa is patient, and Charlie also witnesses a visit from the angel of death, this time to Charlie's roommate, but Charlie is old enough to know that the killer is no angel. Piecing together what he remembers from the night his roommate died and what Jonathan tells him about his gram's death, Charlie sets a trap for the killer, using himself as bait. Now all he has to do is survive. *The Dying Hour* combines a heart-warming story of family pride and honor with a suspense-filled murder mystery that

keeps you on your toes, and the edge of your seat, from beginning to end.

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The Dying Hour

Nancy A. Hughes

A Black Opal Books Publication



GENRE: MYSTERY-DETECTIVE/THRILLER/WOMEN'S FICTION

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THE DYING HOUR

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DEDICATION

*For Bill, Lori, and Dan
Without my family, nothing would mean anything.*

Prologue

Autumn, 2008:

Through the fire door's reinforced glass, the intruder studied the ceiling's dome mirror mounted across the hall. As anticipated, the VA's hospice corridor was empty at this time of night. With the heavy door cracked and secured with one foot, the stranger disabled the latch by securing it with duct tape. The intruder then slipped into the first hospice room and approached the only occupied bed. A frail patient, the chosen target, twitched as if in troubled dreams. *Good*, the intruder thought, *he's still here*. A quick glance at the clock confirmed that the time—three a.m.—was perfect. Withdrawing a vial from a backpack, the stranger removed its protective cap and pierced the seal with a skinny syringe. The needle sucked to the appropriate level. Then, with a touch from experienced fingers, the intruder expelled a few drops. That brought a smile—an air bubble wouldn't matter, but might risk the desired effect. Besides, one should never get sloppy.

At the stranger's touch, the patient's eyes fluttered open and squinted at the tiny light that probed his failing eyes. In a voice that was no longer strong nor commanding, the patient whispered, "Are you an angel?"

The intruder grinned, pleased that fabricating a plausible lie would not be required. "I am."

"Have you come to take me?"

"I have."

The patient drew a shallow breath, his head slipping side-wise on his pillow. Drawing another ragged breath, he closed his eyes, as if prepared for release. With a latex-gloved hand, the intruder grasped the man's withered arm and shook it gently. Bones. He was nothing but bones encased in what felt like a dry cell-thin membrane. The patient's eyelids stuttered open again.

The intruder risked a little more volume, lest the patient not follow the instruction that would provide the stranger with a powerful thrill. "Look! You must look at me. Focus on my eyes. Then I'll take you where you've been longing to go."

The patient did as the "angel" told him to do.

After selecting the appropriate IV line, the stranger delivered the precise measure needed to send the old soldier on his final mission. The patient locked eyes with his savior, staring, unblinking, at the angel of death. The intruder felt a whoosh of adrenalin and watched as that last spark of life faded.

When it was over, the stranger silently gathered all trace of the visit, slipped unnoticed into the hall, removed the duct tape that enabled escape, descended the stairwell, and vanished into the night.



Across Town:

"Jonathan! Don't touch that! Never touch Gram's equipment!"

Jonathan jerked his hand from the shiny dial, fearing that it might shock him.

"You want to kill her? Gram could die if you mess up her stuff."

Jonathan's mother continued to scold him. He looked fearfully from his mother to his beloved old Gram. He dropped his gaze to the floor, clutching his hands behind his back.

The old woman's eyes flickered open. Her left hand that had lain limp on the bed made a small circular motion, beckoning him to her side. A crooked smile formed on her blue lips.

Jonathan's mother rolled her eyes then grudgingly consented for him to get closer. Shyly, he inched toward her face. Gram mouthed *I love you* through the side of her mouth that still worked. He grinned in relief.

Jonathan's mother interrupted with a jerk of her head. "That's enough. Go outside. Or go play with your toys. Gram needs to rest."

Reluctantly, he backed from their presence to escape the sights, sounds, and smells he did not understand. He felt scared and alone.

As he trudged toward the door, a sharp rap interrupted his thoughts. "Get that, will you?" Jonathan's mother called after him. He tugged the door open.

A lady in a white uniform grinned down at him. "Master Jonathan! Just seeing my favorite five-year-old brightens my day. Are your folks home?"

Just hearing *Master* added to his name made him feel special, even though he didn't know why she always said it.

Jonathan stepped back and made room for Gram's favorite nurse. It tickled him that Mrs. White always wore white clothes. He grasped the hand that she held out to him and led her into their old dining room. Now it was used for Gram's special bed.

Jonathan's mom scowled at the calendar on which was scribbled Gram's stuff. "We weren't expecting you until tomorrow."

"I'll be on vacation, but I didn't want to leave without telling your mom and dad. The Visiting Nurses will be sending a substitute. May I speak to your parents, please?"

When Mom nodded, Mrs. White approached the bed. Grandpa rose from the chair where he always sat beside Gram.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Murdock."

"It's Robert!"

"Of course. Thank you, Robert." Then Mrs. White turned to Gram and patted her hand. Gram smiled with her eyes the way she did for special people.

“I’ll be away for a week, but a substitute will visit. I’ve told her all about you, and she knows just what to do. She’s very experienced and anxious to meet you.”

“No men. None of those male nurses!”

Mrs. White turned to Grandpa. “Of course not, Mr. Murdock—ah, Robert. Everyone at the VNA knows Mrs. Murdock’s preferences. Your instructions will always be honored.”

“Will she have the key? Someone’s always here, but just in case...”

“Your house key is in the packet I bring to the house.” She held up a fat folder with folds on the bottom that was tied at the top with string that made an eight. She unwound the string, reached in and produced a tiny blue envelope. She slid the key onto her hand. She lowered her hand to show Jonathan too. “She’ll bring this folder with her.”

Jonathan’s mom cleared her throat. He hated when she did that while glaring at him. “Perhaps you could remind Jonathan that he shouldn’t touch Gram’s equipment?”

Mrs. White stooped to his level. “You know that, right?” she said softly. Even her eyes smiled at him. Standing, she patted his head, just once, like she did whenever she told him what a great helper he was.

“I’ll see myself out.”

As soon as the door closed, Jonathan’s mom frowned at him. Mrs. White’s magic was gone. He scurried outside.

Out back, he sank onto the cracked cement stoop that abutted his mom and grandparents’ house. A loose piece of blistered paint drifted onto his shoe. A chilly wind swirled fallen leaves and chased a torn plastic bag across the scrap of neglected backyard. He shivered. Scrunching his knees to his chest and, rocking slightly, he buried his face in his hands and wept for Gram.

As the chill from the concrete seeped through his jeans, he shivered uncontrollably, yet was unable to move from the spot. In time, long shadows inched past his toes toward the fence as the daylight retreated. Why he hadn’t heard the approaching footsteps, he didn’t know, but magically his grandfather appeared by his side. The big man sat down with a grunt.

With his arm around Jonathan's shoulder, he snuggled the child against him. His coveralls smelled faintly of gasoline, his enormous rough hand covering Jonathan's shoulder with its warmth.

"She didn't mean nothing, boy." He paused for a minute. "Your mom's...well, upset. Not at you. She worries too much about your gram. She works too hard, trying to keep your gram here at home. Doesn't get enough sleep."

Jonathan stole a look at Grandpa who seemed to be watching the clouds. "I didn't mean—"

"Well, of course you didn't."

"I just wanted to help."

"You can. You are. Just by keeping her company, talking to her, letting her know that you love her. That's a lot. But, son, I want you to remember something very important." He paused. "Look at me."

Jonathan peered up at Grandpa, whose face appeared dark against the bright sky.

"Don't ever forget how much Gram loved—loves you. Try to remember the good times you had. Because nobody's ever completely gone as long as someone remembers and cares. You got that?"

"Is she going to die?"

"Not today. Or even tomorrow. Doc says not for some time. But we all go to heaven when God calls our name. And someday we'll all be together in heaven, just like Jesus promised. We just need to believe. Do you understand?"

Jonathan nodded his head to make Grandpa feel better, even though he did not understand.

Chapter 1

July 2009, Ten Months Later:

Charlie Alderfer struggled from the clutches of oblivion, having no sense of time or location. When he finally was able to form coherent thoughts, it struck him. This was not heaven. He had not passed through a tunnel. There was no light and no music. No loved ones to beckon him into the Kingdom. He was still here, but just where was *here*?

Without his glasses, he could identify nothing beyond blurry colors. The smell was distinctive—disinfectant with a trace of something unpleasant. He appeared to be in a hospital bed, and yet not. This wasn't an emergency or recovery room. No medical professionals bustled about. The lighting was dim.

Too weak to struggle further, he gave up and let himself drift.

Back, back, his dreams slipped to that special summer, decades ago. Hot and perfect for swimming, chores all completed. He stood on the bank of Aquasiela Creek, looking for her. And there she was! Seventeen. Tiny. Prettier than anything he could have imagined. Surrounded by multiple friends. So sweet, everyone wanted to claim her as their girl or best friend. Again, they begged her to show how she did it—swim and chew gum at the same time. She obliged, face in and out of the water, rhythmically breathing without choking.

Demonstration finished, she stood in the four-foot deep water, and blew a pink bubble. Everyone laughed and clapped

with delight. When she looked up and caught sight of him, the newcomer, she beckoned for him to join them. And he was drawn into her circle. That was one of her charms—being inclusive. Ever widening her circle to include everyone. He had strained to catch her name. Emma? Yes! That was it.

Emma. Now, in his dream that fast-forwarded decades, he was swimming toward her, but wasn't able to reach her ever-receding outstretched hand. Her smile—that beautiful smile...

Charlie awoke with a start. Instinctively, he attempted to reposition himself, but his arms would not cooperate. He tried harder, but his muscles quavered in protest, forcing him to abandon the effort. The expression, weak as a kitten, popped into his mind. Groping to rub his stiff arms, he realized he was tethered by plastic tubing secured with white tape. He struggled to grasp his strange surroundings. This place was so quiet—no beeping or whooshing or electronic pings.

Suddenly a woman appeared by his bed rail. “Mr. Alderfer? I see you're awake. So glad you decided to join us. I'll let the doctor know you're awake.”

Squinting, he brought into focus a dark-skinned woman dressed in bright garments. “Where am I?” His voice came out as a croak he hardly recognized, words forced through a throat unaccustomed to speaking.

“You're at the VA.” Her voice betrayed a French accent with traces of Jamaica and Creole. She enunciated her query with soft, measured words. “Are you in pain?”

He squirmed, his muscles and joints screaming in protest. He managed a nod.

“We can give you something for that. We want you to be comfortable. That's our specialty 'round here.”

As she waddled toward a dark rectangle that must be a doorway, Charlie looked around. Bright orange and brown fabric circled an area on the opposite side of the room. And he could hear snoring off to his right. Brilliant light spilled through a wall of windows beyond the snoring, which meant Charlie must occupy a bed by the door. Wherever he was, his room appeared to be a ward of some kind. Where did she say?

The woman reappeared accompanied by a man dressed in white. Charlie croaked answers to questions, aware of warm hands and cold metal. When the man was finished, the woman took over. “We find pills easier to swallow if taken with a little applesauce. Do you think you can manage that?” When he nodded yes, she slipped the cold spoon into his mouth. With fierce concentration, he swallowed, allowing the tiny pill to slip down his throat.

“Water? May I have a drink?”

“We’ll need to evaluate whether it needs to be thickened.” To his puzzled expression she added, “You’ve been hydrated through an IV for some time. We need to make sure you don’t choke on thin liquids.”

“Please. Let me try...”

He half expected her to offer a straw or a sippy cup, like the ones his grandbabies used. But after cranking his bed to a more upright position, she held a hard plastic cup with a jutting extension. With fierce concentration, he sipped, relishing the liquid as if he’d been crawling through the desert for days. It tasted incredibly good. But his tongue snagged over rough lips, which felt like sloughed-off snakeskin.

“My mouth, my lips. They’re cracked. And peeling.”

“Let’s try this.” From the nightstand, she picked up what looked to Charlie like a small pink bouquet in a paper cup. She selected one, the end of which resembled a square of bubble gum stuck on a lollypop stick. She ripped off its crinkly covering. “Open your mouth just a little,” she said, then gently swabbed his dry lips. He could make out a smile on red lips. He licked his and nodded his gratitude. “Staff is aware of your status,” she said. “We’ll have your evaluation updated. That includes what you can eat and drink.”

“What day is today?”

“Why, it’s Tuesday.”

Tuesday! Charlie thought hard. My God! I’ve been out for five days. He glanced around helplessly. “Glasses. Could you please look for my glasses?”

She opened the drawer in his nightstand and located a pair of bifocals. She disappeared briefly, and from somewhere near-

by he heard running water. “These were filthy—that’s better,” she said as she glided them gently onto his face. Her hands felt smooth, cool and soft, her manner unhurried.

Instantly, she came into focus. “Thanks,” he murmured, and the nurse grinned with satisfaction. Then she bustled through the black hole that he now could see was the door to the hall.

He studied his new environment. Through the opening in the multi-colored curtain on the opposite wall, he could see a tiny gaunt man with an apricot-colored face. He slept in a fetal position, enveloped in a sea of immaculate white sheets. To Charlie’s right, in the bed by the window, a heavy-set man in navy sweats had awakened. He was watching a sports channel on a tiny TV that was suspended close to his face. He looked over when he noticed that Charlie was staring at him. He grinned. “Good morning.”

Charlie projected his voice, which took utmost effort. “Where did that nurse say I was?”

“The VA. The Veteran’s Association Medical Center.” He chuckled and made a sweeping motion with a hand from which plastic tubes were secured with white tape. “And this here is the last stop on the train.”



Soothed by the pain pill, Charlie slept, all frantic thoughts and raw prickles replaced by disjointed dreams. In twilight sleep, he saw a little boy, hovering near the foot of his bed. Eyes big, watching him. Jimmy! It had to be little Jimmy, exactly as Charlie remembered his brother. He had been only five when they had lost him. The doctor had sworn his heart had been perfect when he was born—before he contracted the measles. Now Jimmy’s mop of nearly white hair floated in slow motion as he swiveled his head. Why had Jimmy, not his Emma, his parents, or grandparents, been sent to escort him into the Kingdom?

Charlie tried to wrench himself from the bed to follow the child. Bright lights intensified the white sea around him, pre-

venting Charlie from seeing where his brother had gone. Again, he tried moving, sure that he'd float, but his body failed to respond. Jimmy disappeared through the dark space. Why had he come if not to lead him? Charlie felt himself slipping back into the sleep from which he had stirred. As it enveloped him, he was struck by the sensation of *clean*—the smell of strong disinfectant. Why was he stuck here, so *in between*? Exhausted, he gave up the struggle for cohesive thought.



That night, a dream that was quite realistic interrupted his sleep. The movement of air. The sensation of someone pausing, as if to study him, and then moving on, leaving a familiar smell that he couldn't quite place. Then a voice—melodious—that was barely a whisper somewhere beyond Charlie's bed. Soft and low, someone was uttering priestly incantations. Not exactly like praying but something about *angels* and *taking you where you are longing to go*. Bewildered, he listened, but there were no further words, just the essence of someone. Rustlings and murmurs. Footsteps departing. Then silence.

A new dream transported Charlie back to his Emma. Still young and so beautiful, and their two little girls, beckoning to him. His ladies wore sundresses in fresh springtime colors and carried their old picnic hamper. The harder he tried to catch up with his ladies, the more the distance stretched like worn elastic until they were mere dots on a field of wild flowers.

A commotion, coming from somewhere nearby, brought Charlie back to the present. Dim lights flickered on the opposite wall above the jaundiced patient's bed. A woman with something black draped around her neck slid Charlie's privacy curtain around his bed. Stuttering on its track, its squeak awakened him further. Shortly he heard another curtain moving near the window.

"What's happening?" a gruff voice demanded.

"It's all right, Mr. D. Go back to sleep."

"He's gone, isn't he?"

Charlie strained to hear her reply, but the ringing of sleep in his ears seemed especially loud, and the woman soothed in barely a whisper. In time, the curtain at the end of his bed whooshed in a current of air. From the opening where the curtain didn't quite reach the wall, Charlie glimpsed a horizontal American flag floating out of the room. The lights were extinguished, the room cocooned in silence and shadows again.

Suddenly Charlie was wide awake. And scared. As scared as any moment he'd experienced since leaving Vietnam. It wasn't death itself that he feared—it was the process. And, at that very moment, he knew that he was not destined to transition smoothly.



Charlie awoke to daylight striking his face. A cheerful soul was pulling back his curtain. “Mr. Alderfer, good morning. Sir! Glad you've decided to join us. Been kind of boring, talking to myself. I'm Mike, your first-shift nurse. Hope you can stand morning people. If not, you're still stuck with me.” He elevated the head of Charlie's bed so that Charlie didn't have to look over his nose to see him. “How did you sleep?”

“I thought I was dead.” Charlie processed the man. Not too tall, fair, slender, maybe forty, with closely cropped hair and steady blue eyes behind metal-rim glasses. “I had strange dreams. People coming and going. And I dreamed about my family who've been gone many years. Like my little brother, Jimmy. My brothers and I used to carry him everywhere. My daughters both got vaccinated, thank God.” He tried to remember the impression. “The dreams were so real. Could it be the pain pill she gave me?”

Over Mike's shoulder, Charlie caught a glimpse of the now-vacant bed. The curtain was retracted way back to the wall, the bed stripped to its burgundy vinyl mattress. Disinfectant scent lingered.

Mike noticed his stare. “Mr. Jones passed away during the night.”

“Oh! That's too bad.”

“He was ready. Each morning he would say to me, ‘Oh, dear, why am I still here? Why doesn’t He take me? I’m ready to go. I keep praying.’”

“I never heard him made a sound. He wasn’t in pain?”

“We’re expert at keeping our patients comfortable without drugging them senseless. Here, it’s about the quality of passing from this world to the next.” He nodded, apparently satisfied with what sounded to Charlie like a corporate sound bite.

Mike snapped on a cheerful face and blue vinyl gloves. “We have a routine, you and I, that you probably don’t remember. That’s okay. It’s normal. However, for now I’ll have to listen to your complaints. That’s fine, as long as you don’t bash the Marines. Got that?”

Charlie couldn’t help smiling. *Semper fi yourself.*

“First, we’ll take your vitals, get you washed, shaved, and into fresh pajamas. I want you looking spiffy when the white coats arrive.”

“Coats?”

“Your team—the doctor, support staff, physical and occupational therapists, social worker, psychologist, clergy if you choose, and so on. Residents, medical students, and nurses in training also rotate through here. Each team visits one-fourth of our patients a week, but our doctor and staff are on duty twenty-four seven. There are three nurses for every four patients on this ward. And first shift, you get me.”

“When can I go home?” Charlie asked in what sounded even to him like a pitiful voice.

Mike’s flinch was barely perceptible, but Charlie had been watching his face. “Dr. Szish will discuss your prognosis with you. I don’t have the details, and besides, I’m not permitted to speak for the docs.”



It didn’t take long for Charlie to realize the depth and degradation to which he had sunk. The catheter, the Depends, the mouths full of pills he needed to swallow to free himself from the IV. The nurse had been professional, assuring him of his

credentials that ranged from medical to parental experience. But, in the end, the result was the same—the previously strong, healthy, active young retiree was reduced to being a grownup in diapers. Grateful as he was for the compassionate care, the humiliation was crushing.

Mike finished Charlie's morning routine and moved on to attend his next patient. Before Charlie had time to contemplate his situation, a tall, slender man who looked vaguely familiar arrived at his bedside. *Dr. Szish* was embroidered in blue script above the left breast pocket of his white lab coat. "Mr. Alderfer? Good morning, Sir. I'm your physician. How are you feeling?"

Unlike other medical professionals Charlie had known in the past, Dr. Szish did not seem to be in a hurry. He actually wanted an answer. With Charlie's permission, he repositioned the bed to enable the men to speak face to face. He pulled up a chair and, settling in, crossed his lanky legs that ended in spit-shined tassel loafers. His thinning black hair was slicked to one side in a futile attempt to combat curls, and his voice had a quiet, even cadence. It was his smile, however, that dominated his flawless face.

Charlie couldn't help smiling. "I'm okay. Glad to still be here. I think."

Dr. Szish's smile broadened. "We need to talk about many things—your medical condition, your concerns, your needs."

Charlie's bravado, what little he'd mustered, collapsed in the kind doctor's presence. What was it that made a person hang tough in the presence of battle, evil, or meanness, yet be completely undone by genuine kindness? Tears threatened, but Charlie succeeded in blinking them back. The doctor seemed not to notice.

"I'm so confused, and worried, and disoriented. What happened to me? And where is it all going? Please—help me understand."

"I believe in telling the truth. Is that acceptable?"

"Just give it to me straight. What I can't handle is not knowing. The fear of that other shoe falling. I'm no stranger to suffering and death."

“Okay. What do you remember about your emergency?”

“Very little.” Charlie’s recollections were sketchy at best. “I’d watered the roses and positioned the lawn chair to watch for that first star. The phone rang—it’s in the kitchen—and I hurried to catch it before the fifth ring. Then, this incredible, searing pain. The phone clattered away—I was yelling, I think. Then people erupting into the house and snatches of being in an ER. A helicopter ride, then a hospital somewhere. Fragments of dreams I can’t remember, except that they were frightening and weird. I could hear muffled voices, but couldn’t make out what they were saying. Nothing more specific until I woke up in here. It’s all a big blur.”

“Sometimes it’s better not to remember. According to our records, you were transported first to a local ER, then grasping the gravity of your situation, to a regional trauma center. There, you had major surgery. They had to restart your heart twice. Ultimately, you were brought to the VA.”

“What kind of surgery? For what?”

“You had a ruptured aneurysm. Because the paramedics responded so quickly, the ER stabilized you rapidly and air lifted you to a facility that could handle your needs, you had a shot at survival.”

“A ruptured aneurysm? Where?” Charlie ran his hand through his thatch of white hair, but it seemed undisturbed.

The doctor pressed his own solar plexus with his fist. “Here.”

Charlie gazed down at his own chest, as if he could see through his pajamas. “How did I end up at the VA?”

The doctor paused momentarily. “In spite of the surgeons’ best efforts, you weren’t expected to live. Twenty-four hours passed, but you hung on. That turned into thirty-six, forty-eight, and so on. Still, you didn’t regain consciousness. They expected to lose you at any time. You were stable and able to breathe on your own, but the prognosis was grim. Finally, you were transported here, where we specialize in comfort and a dignified transition.”

“A dignified transition? Where? A rehab? Home?”

Strange, the things you notice at the most inappropriate times, Charlie thought, distracted by the doctor's smooth, flawless skin. Had it not been for a few wrinkles, the man could have been in his mid-twenties. Charlie's eyes stuck on this contradiction while his mind tried to absorb what he was saying.

"This is the VA's Hospice Center."

Charlie jolted. "Hospice? That's what this is? But isn't that for cancer patients who are near death? Am I going to die?"

The doctor smiled. "We're all going to die, hopefully later than sooner. Our patients range from those who are actively dying to those whose expectancy is six months or less. You have surprised us. You're pretty tough. Your heart keeps on pumping, you have good lungs and no other major medical problems." He looked at a chart. "Your blood pressure's low normal, cholesterol numbers are great, you aren't diabetic, and you aren't overweight. Your challenge centered on that one condition and complications from this and past surgeries."

"So, what caused it—my war injuries?"

"I see from your records that you were shot in the gut. That you had major abdominal surgery. And prior to that you had both your appendix and your gall bladder removed, but at different times."

Charlie nodded. "And ten years ago, I had what they called a 'dissected aorta.' They rushed me to the ER from work, and operated on me immediately."

"May I have a look?" When Charlie nodded agreement, Doctor Szish lifted Charlie's pajama top and scrutinized his torso. Charlie took the opportunity to inspect the new scars himself. His abdomen was a maze of crisscrossing lines that reminded him of a railroad junction. Oddly, even the new scars looked old, his recent surgery completely healed. The doctor nodded approvingly.

"I'm confused. If everything's healed, why am I in here?"

"You mean in Hospice?"

"Yeah."

"Your incisions appear to have healed very nicely. Having been out of it for so long, you missed the agony of early recovery. That was a blessing. But you still have a long way to go."

Charlie frowned at the new scars that were merely pink lines. "I'm surprised that I healed so quickly. If this is Wednesday, and my attack was last Thursday..."

The doctor rested a hand on his arm. "Charlie. Your attack was on a Thursday, that's true. But that was five weeks ago. You've been with us a rather long time."

"Five weeks! Oh my god. My girls must be frantic."

"Everyone was very concerned, but we've keep your daughters informed. Both have been here twice, and are planning to return."

Charlie flopped his head with such vigor that it ground a dent in his pillow. "But they live so far away. Georgia and California. And they have their own lives. Jobs. Husbands. Children. What a hardship this must be for them."

"They're not complaining. Your daughters are truly amazing people."

Charlie rocked his head back and forth. "Then I guess I can't just go home without letting them know."

Dr. Szish laughed. "Well, hardly!"

"So what happens now? As soon as I get my strength back, can I go home?"

The doctor sighed and shook his head.

"What?"

"The surgeons repaired the ruptured aneurysm. That was successful. An aneurysm forms as a result of a weakness in the lining of the artery wall. Like a thin spot in a balloon. Just like a balloon, it can burst under pressure if it gets too thin. Some people have small aneurysms they don't ever know about—they live and die *with* them and not *of* them." He paused, a little too long.

"O—kay..."

"The challenge ahead of you now is that there's another aneurysm. The surgeon's primary function was saving your life—repairing what had ruptured." Again, the doctor indicated its location on his own chest. "The remaining aneurysm is located in a dangerous position. Going after it then would have been fatal. I'm sorry. They said it was inoperable."

Charlie was stunned. "I'm a ticking bomb? It could rupture any minute?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. When you're strong enough, further studies can be done. In the meantime, you need rehabilitation. We'll take precautions. For instance..." He lifted the hem of Charlie's pajama top again and pointed to the surgical scars. "You can never, ever do abdominal exercises again. Those muscles have been sliced and diced too many times. When you're ready to be up and around, and especially when you go to physical therapy, you'll need to wear a wide protective belt to support your abdominal muscles."

"Like the pro wrestlers and body builders wear?"

"Exactly. One will be made specifically for you."

"But what if—"

"Let's focus on the positive. Our professionals will be keeping you busy, evaluating everything from your ability to swallow to how soon physical therapy can begin. Everyone here is rooting for you."

"But you said this is Hospice—"

"The VA's Hospice offers patients and their loved ones comfort and the highest quality of life when illness is life limiting or cannot be cured. Our veterans are very sick people. We aren't doing surgery, chemo, or experimental treatment—just the ultimate possible accommodations for comfort and a painless transition. And we accommodate families as well. We have twenty-four hour visiting with no age restriction. Even pets are welcome—"

Charlie interrupted him. "Please answer my question. About that other aneurysm? Is it going to blow any minute? *Am I in danger of dying right now?*"

"We certainly hope not. We do, occasionally, have patients who graduate and go home. Yours is an unusual case."

"Then shouldn't I be on a regular ward? Or transferred to a rehab facility?"

"I believe the level of care that you'll receive here will make all the difference in your recuperation, especially if that other aneurysm becomes problematic. The ER and surgical suites are right in this building.

“But if I’m not going to die within your timeframe—”

Dr. Szish placed a reassuring hand on Charlie’s arm. He hesitated. Charlie waited.

“You were badly wounded in the service of our country,” the doctor finally said. “Your recent surgery was complicated as a result. You have paid in advance for the best care available. All our veterans deserve nothing less. Besides, the staff has grown rather fond of you.” He grinned at Charlie. “We’re keeping you. And I will personally verify that this facility is appropriate. Now—any other questions and concerns I can answer?”

“That handful of pills. Can we get rid of whatever is making me groggy? Giving me weird dreams?”

“Sure. I’ll enter that order into our computer. But—now listen, this is important—I *will* prescribe something for pain if you need it. Recovery isn’t always a straight line. If you feel overwhelmed by depression, anxiety, or insomnia, we want to know about that too. Tell us before pain gets intolerable. Whatever you need will have our attention. You just have to tell us. Don’t say you’re fine if you’re not. Speak up. No matter’s too small.”

“I’m so hungry.”

Dr. Szish grinned. “Dietary will be around later today. In the meantime, we’ll raid our kitchen for something appropriate.”

After he left, Charlie stole a peek at his belly and felt a wave of gratitude for once again dodging a bullet. Gradually, he calmed from the information overload. Unlike Mr. Jones, the man with the apricot face, he was still here and didn’t have to break the news to his daughters. But he still didn’t understand his prognosis. He squirmed, wondering just how much movement was safe. Later. He’d ask more questions later. Three nurses for every four patients? He located the call button, comforted that he could summon one at the first hint of disaster.

Chapter 2

Although no sound had roused him, Charlie felt watched. He had fallen asleep with his glasses perched on the end of his nose while trying to watch CNN on his tiny, suspended TV. His efforts at reorienting himself to a fast-changing world had worked better than a serious sedative.

What was different? Suddenly Charlie noticed a small blond boy who had slipped into the room on little cat feet. By his height, the lad must have been four or five. The child stared straight ahead at Charlie's neighbor by the window, whose name he had learned was Vincent DePasquali. Charlie lay perfectly still, struck by another mystery solved. Jimmy! Charlie's little brother who had died all those decades ago—the resemblance to this little boy was uncanny, although Charlie's recollection was limited to his own childhood memories and old family photos. This lad had a slight little body and home-barbered hair that lifted with static electricity. Who was this child?

Charlie watched. For once, Mr. DePasquali's circular curtain was fully open. The big man wiggled his left index finger coaxingly while rummaging in something that crinkled like cellophane. Then he dangled a silver object, suspended by a small strip of paper that glistened in a shaft of sunlight. Again, his roommate beckoned to the boy. When the child hesitated, DePasquali swung the object in a small circular motion while charming the boy with a grandfather's smile. Charlie repositioned his glasses to watch.

“Come on—come get it.” The boy’s face brightened as he slipped toward the bed. “I saved this one just for you,” DePasquali said. “Don’t tell now. It’s our little secret. Go ahead.”

The child plucked the proffered silver object from the man’s paw of a hand and grinned.

“It’s okay. You may eat it.”

The child unwrapped the treat and popped it whole into his mouth. The man then extended his hand into which the boy placed the wrapper. Obviously, this routine wasn’t new.

The boy suddenly jerked his head to attention. Charlie hadn’t heard anything of particular importance, but evidently the youngster had. As quickly as he had appeared, he bolted from the room without saying a word.

“Cute little boy. Is he your grandson?” Charlie asked.

“No idea who he is, but I’m working on it. He’s here every day.” Grinning, he held up the cellophane bag. “Hershey’s Kisses. Sold by the bag down in the canteen. Had my family fetch it for me. With kids, you gotta have the right bait.”

Charlie thought hard, trying to reconstruct the fleeting dream into which he had worked the silent little visitor. It hadn’t been Jimmy at all. Just something his groggy brain had dredged from the past. He’d never told his parents how deeply and unendingly he had grieved for his brother. They were upset enough. Now he realized that if he had to die, at least he would have Jimmy waiting for him.

DePasquali had been talking, and Charlie, embarrassed, asked him to repeat. “My family’s Italian, and if you know Italians, we’ve got this food thing. The family thinks they can cure me with pasta. You won’t believe the stuff they bring in.” He smoothed his hand down his distended belly. “Can’t eat it, though. It’s the cancer.”

“Isn’t there anything they can do for you?”

“Nothing worked. After the last round of torture, I said ‘enough.’ When they offered to keep me comfortable here, I jumped at the chance. This wonderful stuff they pump into my veins—do you have any idea what the street value would be?” He chuckled, enjoying his joke. “Nobody cares if I get addicted because this is my last stop on the train.”

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. It's been a great ride. And besides, I'm not done having fun. Best guessimate, I could hang around until Christmas, and it's only September."

Charlie felt panic edge into his chest, the killer aneurysm poised to explode. He desperately needed to change the subject. "The little boy—what have you learned about him?"

"The only way he could be here is attached to somebody's family who's visiting a patient. You know, we have twenty-four hour visitation here. Staff wouldn't bring in a child—at least not every day and not while on duty." He exhaled and took a few halting breaths, his attention focused somewhere beyond the end of his bed. DePasquali shook his head. "Strangest thing about that child. He never speaks. Not one word. Give a kid your undivided attention, and you can't shut him up. But not him."

"How long has he been visiting you?"

"A couple of weeks. And I've never heard him say anything. Maybe he's deaf or mute or disabled somehow."

"Have you asked the staff?"

"Tried. But everyone's spooked about privacy issues. That HIPPA nonsense. Well, maybe some of it's necessary, but it's gotten out of hand."

"Has anyone ever come looking for him?"

DePasquali shook his head. "Kid must have radar. He becomes aware of something, then splits."

"I doubt that he's deaf. After he ate the candy, something caught his attention. Then he bolted. No, I'd bet that whatever his problem, it isn't his ears. He looked scared."

"Uh oh. It's the coats."

Before Charlie could question the comment, it became obvious. At least eight professionals, mostly in white coats, trooped into the room. Bearing clipboards and kindly expressions, they formed a semicircle around Charlie's bed. With his permission, someone adjusted its height while someone else drew his privacy curtain, enveloping them in a colorful tent. *If they talk among themselves as if I'm some specimen, as if I'm not here—*

Instead, all eyes and smiles were on him. One by one, they introduced themselves by specialty and gave a brief rundown on how they would help. That they said *would*, and not *could* was not lost on him.



After hours of mindless television repeats and feeble attempts at reading a magazine, Charlie mind came to attention. What DePasquali had said about addiction—did that apply to him too? He would ask, no beg, to be taken off all drugs, especially the ones that muddled his mind. He could tolerate pain, and he'd never had trouble sleeping. And that little brown pill, that so-called stool softener—that he blamed for his not having time to transition from Depends to the bathroom. At one point, he had been grateful for even the smallest service that kept him clean, comfortable, and free of sore skin. No matter the gender, or the constant reminder about professionalism, Charlie's sharper mind felt humiliated and degraded. Just how close was that bathroom door anyway? Ten feet? Twelve?

A second shift nurse, going off at eleven, approached his bedrail. "Still can't sleep? Your chart says you may have something if you feel you need it."

Charlie shook his head. "Reveille starts around here at six in the morning. I'd feel like a zombie the rest of the day."

"My point exactly. Tomorrow night could go better. How about half or one quarter dose?"

Charlie relented. "Okay. Just enough to take off the edge. My mind won't stop churning."

Perhaps it was psychological. Or sleep was long overdue, but within fifteen minutes Charlie stirred, realizing he had started to dream. He was in his daughter Susan's cozy rancher in suburban San Diego. She had been standing at her new stainless stove, stirring her latest version of chili. She looked so much like her mother, but unlike his Emma, had a feisty disposition when provoked. Susan was telling him...what? He turned on his side, tucking his blanket under his chin. He returned his mind to Susan's happy home. By now, he knew it was okay to

ignore any commotion that fragile roommates required. He likened it to being in church, or an airplane with a fretful baby, about whom he had no responsibility or need to respond.

While floating from vision to vision, he became aware of squeaking footsteps. They drifted past him toward Vincent DePasquali. Night nurse, he thought, but noticed an unusual scent left in the person's wake. Not perfume. Not even feminine, but not manly aftershave or deodorant soap. Something oily. It was...what? In time, whomever he was sensing drifted beyond him. He was far too groggy to open his eyes. The visitor was saying something about *taking you where you've been longing to go*. The voice, as in a previous dream, was vaguely familiar. Not Mike. Not Dr. Szish. Charlie drifted back to his dreams.



An ordinary evening—that's how Charlie would always remember it. He and DePasquali had fallen into a compatible routine, like old army buddies. DePasquali kept Charlie enthralled and in stitches, sometimes near tears with colorful tales of his childhood escapades in New York's Little Italy.

Charlie could picture it and felt intimately attracted to his family and mischievous dozens of cousins with musical names.

When second shift nurses began their duties at three that afternoon, Charlie had felt at peace. While he didn't see daily progress, he recognized the difference time was making. And he had finally made some real progress on the PT machines. His muscles ached, but it *was* muscle, not bone, joint, incision, or arthritis. Tear down to build up, only stronger. And he made a conscious decision that denying the existence of that lurking aneurysm meant good mental health.

Charlie and DePasquali had said their good nights, DePasquali having received his meds right on time. Charlie knew the routine and never summoned staff for nonessentials while the meds were being dispensed. Managing pain was job one, and even a brief delay could mean the difference between comfort and agony. You could set your watch by the routine that super-

seded almost everything else short of a fire. In no time, DePasquali had been snoring.

With increased activity, and wrapped in the caring cocoon that was Hospice, Charlie usually slept soundly. Staff had located just the right pillows and adjusted his bed to perfection. Folded neatly at the foot of the bed a handmade quilt, appliquéd with American flags, stars and stripes on a white field edged in navy, waited for him in case he got cold. A VFW auxiliary had presented the quilt onto which was embroidered a simple message: *Thank you for defending our country and our freedom.* Charlie had gulped back emotional tears when the three women appeared in his room, their gift wrapped in white tissue paper. That evening, the quilt covered Charlie's long legs and feet, which were always too cold. The corner containing the message was positioned against the bedrail within easy reach. As second shift glided through their quality-of-life duties, his sleepy mind could usually ignore any commotion that didn't involve him. Night shift transitioned onto duty by eleven.

He began trusting that he might be lucky. Get well enough to graduate and leave Hospice under his own power. A small, unintentional slip that a nurse had made while arranging his quilt gave him hope. She had said, "When you go home, you can take the quilt with you." Until then, he hadn't dared hope that his ride on the train would be a round trip. She had said *when*, and not *if*.

That night he slept with the peace of the angels, even dreaming of one. The angel in his dream was male with a silky, reassuring voice that uttered otherworldly incantations. Charlie didn't stir until a familiar hand touched his shoulder.

"Rise and shine," Mike said. Sunshine flooded the room. Charlie's stomach growled. Lots to do, he thought, as he ticked through his mental check list for Thursday's routine. Breakfast, his favorite meal. Shower day. Mike would position him on a chair, and allow him to soap and shampoo himself while enjoying as much warm water as he pleased. He'd wear his new sweats and sneakers and go to PT before lunch. As Mike prepared to help him out of bed and position him at his walker for the few steps to the bathroom, Charlie jolted. DePasquali was

gone. His bed had been stripped to its heavy vinyl structure. His medical paraphernalia also was missing. What remained were his personal possessions, books and framed pictures, that lined the deep windowsill.

Mike was prepared. “Mr. DePasquali passed away during the night sometime after his daughter went back to New York. The family had tried to keep a vigil, but felt he’d be okay for a while. He just slipped away.”

“But—but he was doing so well. Why, just yesterday he wanted his family to wheel him outside. The gorgeous weather here in the country exhilarated him. Made him feel wonderful—so unlike the gritty New York of his childhood. He was so full of plans. And he was talking about Hospice’s Christmas party. That’s three months away.”

Mike nodded. “He did have a good day. He wanted a taste of ice cream, even though he knew he couldn’t swallow it. That last burst of energy isn’t uncommon when death is near. We had one old guy—he was ninety-five—who hadn’t been out of bed in a year. All of a sudden, he wanted to go out. It was a perfect spring day. He loved every second of the adventure, as he called it. The next day he was gone.”

“But Christmas—”

“We celebrate Christmas several times a year. No need to wait.”

“But he seemed, so, robust for someone who was that close to death.”

“He just talked a good game—that was his personality. But he was a very sick man.”

Charlie tried to remember. A fleeting memory registered, which hinted at something unsettling. “That must have been what weaved itself into my dream. Not an angel but a male nurse checking on him.”

“When was that?”

“No idea. But the hall lights were dim.”

Mike frowned. “Couldn’t be staff. Third shift in Hospice are women.”

“In my dream, the angel wore white. He was tall. And big. In my dream, I tried speaking to him, but my mouth wouldn’t work.”

“Sure sounds as if you were dreaming. Did you take a sleep aid?”

“Just enough to help me relax. I’d been so wired. At home, sometimes I’d dream that I’d stayed awake all night, but this wasn’t like that. An angel-like person came into the room. I’m certain of that. And he wore white.”

Mike shrugged. “A late family visitor perhaps. They didn’t like leaving him alone. They’re afraid he’ll need something and be too weak to ring the call button. And they didn’t want him dying alone. Still, they couldn’t keep a twenty-four vigil for months on end. Maybe he had a friend or relative who works on another floor. Stopped by on break or after second shift to check up on him. Sometimes people just come to pray.”

Charlie sighed. “Yeah, that sounds reasonable and would account for my impression of praying.” Mike didn’t seem to be in a hurry. “When did he pass?”

“I heard it was around three. The dying hour.”

“The dying hour?”

“Night-shift nurses describe a phenomenon whereby terminal patients tend to die around three in the morning, perhaps after making one last attempt to turn over. It’s uncanny. No explanation. But observed often enough to become folklore.”

“He’s going to be missed by that little blond boy. Do you know who he is? The one who visited Mr. D. every day? I understand that HIPPA privacy stuff, but a child that age couldn’t be a veteran. So what’s the harm?”

Mike grinned. “Army or navy maybe, but definitely not a marine. Seriously, I don’t think there’s any harm in saying he comes in with his mother. She sits, all day, every day with her father. His room’s down the hall.”

“Is the child free to wander?”

Mike took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Just between us?”

“Sure. Of course.”

“My sense is that the child has nowhere else to go. If his mother feels she needs to be here and there’s no one to babysit him, staff doesn’t appear to object. But I’m guessing. I don’t know if there’s a hard and fast rule about children. If there is, they’re cutting the family some slack. Besides, the boy is a sweetheart. We never see him running around, getting into things, making noise or a nuisance of himself. He wouldn’t have come into this room if Mr. D. hadn’t coaxed him.”

“What does he do all day?”

“Just slips around. Watches out the dayroom windows. Colors—he’s quite an artist for such a young child. He looks at picture books. TV. He’s like a little ghost. If he weren’t so obedient and quiet, someone would have objected by now.”

“How long has he been coming?”

Mike pursed his lips, eyes narrowed in thought. “His grandfather was admitted shortly after you came. No, make that two weeks after. Something like that. I didn’t notice him at first. The gentleman wasn’t my patient. And we’d had an unusually high turnover rate—patients here for two to four days. We were overwhelmed. And that patient didn’t need constant attention.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“Heart.” Involuntarily, Mike grimaced. “I wasn’t supposed to say that. If the family wants to tell you about their situation or his diagnosis, that’s one thing. But we are forbidden. For example, if a patient is admitted and he happens to be my neighbor, I can’t go home and tell the others on our street that he’s here. Even a minister, who visits a parishioner from his own congregation, cannot announce it in church without permission. I could be fired for what I just said.”

Charlie chuckled. “Said? Huh? Don’t hear very well...” He smiled, remembering a new VA joke shared with him by another patient from the Skilled Nursing ward. “One of the old guys waiting his turn in PT told me he had the honkers disease. I said, ‘What’s that?’ and the guy made a noise like a goose: ‘Huh? Huh? Huh?’ He proceeded to tell me that staff labeled him as *confused*. ‘I’m not confused. I’m deaf! Damn hearing aid is worthless for nerve deafness. So I pretend to know what

they're talking about. Half the time, what I say doesn't make any sense. At least to them. We old guys call it the honkers' disease."

Mike smiled then refocused. "Mr. D's family will be coming in shortly to collect his personal possessions. The timing will be good for you—a shower, PT, and so on. And, if you're not too tired, Escort can bring you back to the dayroom. They're running movies on the big-screen TV after lunch. That will give the family time and some privacy."

"Do you think they'd let me have the bag of Hershey's Kisses? A certain little boy might appreciate them. Of course I could send to the canteen for my own..."

"I'm sure they'd be happy to leave them."

Mike helped Charlie out of bed, positioned him at his walker, then released the hand brake. With one hand on Charlie's back and another prepared to redirect the walker, Mike accompanied Charlie into the bathroom. He sat. All that water and fresh stuff he ate produced results effortlessly. Never, ever again would he take anything this fundamental for granted.



Charlie was expecting, yet at the same time dreading, the little boy's next appearance. Mr. D, as he'd heard everyone refer to Vincent DePasquali, was gone. Perhaps the lad had one of those dissociative conditions or was incapable of feelings, empathy or loss. Or maybe he was too young to grasp the concept of death. Could he simply be shy? Or traumatized by some unknown person, place or event?

That afternoon, most patients were napping during that lull that followed the flurry of morning appointments, rounds, lunch, and meds. The ward beyond Charlie's door was very quiet. He settled for an old *Law & Order* rerun and became drowsy himself. Perhaps it was Charlie's sixth sense that sparked his attention. He opened his eyes. The little blond boy had materialized at the foot of his bed, staring at Mr. D's stripped bed. He turned to Charlie. Without words, he seemed to be asking the inevitable question.

“Mr. D isn’t here,” Charlie said. “I’m sorry to say that he won’t be back.”

The boy stared hard at the naked bed where his friend used to be. Then he looked back at Charlie. He waited. Perhaps, Charlie thought, he really is deaf. Responds to vibrations or his own inner signals. His little face seemed to be searching. Finally, he turned to leave.

“Wait!” Charlie called after him, a little too loudly. The boy jumped. *Ah ha!* Charlie thought. *He can hear.* “I’d love it if you would visit with me. I’ll even find out where Mr. D. got the chocolate. I don’t have many visitors, and it gets kind of lonely. I’d like it if you would stop in.”

The youngster stared. Although he looked less afraid, his gaze dropped to his sneakers. Charlie noticed that even though they were too big, the toes were worn into holes. His elasticized jeans, rolled to a cuff, were patched at the knees, and his tee shirt was stained. The clothes, like the child, however, were clean. By the creases, he noticed, his shirt had been pressed.

The boy turned, as if to leave then stopped and turned imploring eyes to Charlie. Then, wordlessly, he held up both hands in supplication, as if to ask, “Where’d he go?”

Charlie, though taken aback, decided to chance an explanation. After thinking a moment, he took a deep breath while considering just the right words. He could lie and say Mr. D. had gone home or to another hospital, but that wasn’t right. Children needed to trust what grownups told them. How to explain? With his daughters, the lesson had been gradual. The bird that broke its neck crashing into their picture window. The countless little critters that rotated through their small animal cages. Their garden funerals. The neighbor’s cat that got hit in the road. Their grandparents’ passing. Baby steps into the cycle of life. They’d gone to Sunday school since they were toddlers. By the time they were seven, his little girls were fully grounded in faith, knowing that Jesus would be there for them. What could this little guy’s background be?

“Mr. D was a very sick man. He suffered a lot. But now, that’s all over. Mr. D has gone to heaven to live with God and Jesus and all his family who died and went to heaven before

him. In heaven, there is no pain. No suffering. Only God's love."

The child scrunched his face, as if not comprehending. Then he stooped to look under the bed.

"He's not here. His soul is in heaven," Charlie repeated. "He's through with his earthly body. He'll get a glorious new body. One that's never sick or in pain—" *No, that's too complicated. Way too abstract.* He started again. "He told me that his worn-out body will be taken to church. His family will have a lovely church service for him. They will be sad, but they know that they'll see him again in heaven when their time comes."

The child looked downright anguished. Then, in the tiniest voice, he whispered. "But—where is he *now*?" He wanted specifics.

Startled, Charlie groped for the right words. "Well, I haven't seen the place exactly, but from what I hear the hospital has a special room in the basement where caring people will place his old, worn-out body in a fancy box for its last journey. Then a big shiny car, with people dressed in their best clothes, will take his old body to wherever the family will have his church service. His family, from all over the country, will come to his service. There will be flowers, music, and lots of praying. They'll take turns telling stories about him. They'll laugh and they'll cry. But they'll be glad that he was part of their lives. When the service is over, the family and friends will take his old body to a place where it will rest forever. But Mr. D won't be in that body. He'll be in heaven."

Charlie was terrified that he'd said it all wrong. Babbled too much. But the boy looked less worried. Charlie continued. "He was your friend. I know that you'll miss him. But if you'll come visit me, I'll be your friend too." That brought a tentative smile. "Would you like that?"

The boy nodded slightly.

"More than anything, he wanted to know your name. Do you think you could share that with me?"

Charlie waited. Silence. He resisted the urge to fill it with words he didn't have. Just when he was about to give up and fill the void with "That's okay," the child opened his mouth.

“Jonathan,” he whispered.

Charlie couldn’t help grinning. “Jonathan! Why, I had a brother named John. We called him Johnny.”

“My Gram called me Johnny. She died.” Bottomless sorrow transformed his face.

“I’m so sorry.” So this child *was* acquainted with death. With that kind of loss. He groped for something meaningful to say. “Your grandma and Mr. D will have something to talk about in heaven. They can talk about you!”

Jonathan started to cry soundlessly. Tears seemed to spurt off his long dark lashes before trickling down his chubby cheeks. The light had gone out. That dear little child. For a few precious seconds, his spirit had opened. And he had spoken. But the window had closed. Jonathan wiped his face on the back of his sleeve. Charlie longed to gather him into a hug and comfort him. But he was too slow. Head hung, the child turned to go.

“Jonathan? Please wait. There’s something else I’d like to tell you about Mr. D. He was my friend, too.”

Jonathan turned his head slightly but stared at the floor.

“Mr. D said many times how special he thought you are. How he enjoyed your visits. You made his days here very happy.”

Charlie took off his glasses to wipe his own eyes. When he replaced them and focused, Jonathan was gone.



In a working class neighborhood of identical ranchers, Elsabet Bentz admitted the prospective health-care aide into her home.

He jugged a huge hand for her to shake. “Ben Tothero, ma’am,” he said. “Saw your ad. Thought I could help.”

She took a deep breath and began rattling through the well-practiced summary of her dilemma to this man, her last possibility for help. “My husband can’t walk anymore. And I can’t lift him.” Unconsciously, she wrung her hands, as if rubbing in too much lotion. That she was desperate was evident, in spite of

her efforts to hide it. She loved her husband to distraction, had since they had been high school sweethearts. She never, in a million years, would pray that his suffering would end in death. What she and everyone who knew him wanted, prayed for unceasingly, was a cure.

“Mr. Tothero, I—”

“Call me Ben,” he said with an easy smile. “What are you, four feet ten or eleven? Of course, you can’t lift a man.”

“My husband wasn’t that old when he was first diagnosed. The paralysis crept up him, bit by bit, and robbed him of feeling. At first, it was numb feet and an occasional fall, which forced him to go to the doctor for tests. When physical therapy failed, there were more tests and finally the MS diagnosis.”

“Did he try that injection therapy? Interferon something-or-other?”

“We prayed that would help. It’s been a miracle for many, but it did nothing for him. With a cane, then a walker, and finally a wheelchair, he continued working as a locksmith. A handicap van with hand controls replaced his Ford F150. We installed a ramp in place of our beautiful front garden. We widened our interior doors and replaced toilets with handicap versions. Handrails everywhere helped. You’ll see a track in the ceiling over his bed for an electric lift with a sling. That helps him move from wheelchair to bed and vice versa.

“He’s such a proud man. When his inability to manage stairs made serving his clients impossible, he found an administrative desk job through his network of friends and business associates.”

“Is he at work now?”

She shook her head. “The numbness spread up his body. Now he can’t feel anything below his navel. One day, while I was at work, he fell in the bathroom and lay wedged between the toilet and wall until I got home five hours later. I was unable to extricate him—had to call the paramedics. He was so humiliated. At that point, he made the tough decision to check himself into a skilled nursing facility. He was too disabled for independent living. While there, he became semi-bedridden.”

Should she tell him how their insurance ran out and their savings hemorrhaged? She just couldn't. "This is his idea," Elsabet told Ben Totho, the complete stranger. "He insists he'll be okay here at home with hired muscle. Someone to get him up, help him dress, and get him into his wheelchair. See, if he falls, he's like a bug on its back. I've put a special chair in the shower. If my helper can get him in and turn on the water, he can bathe himself. Everything works above his belly. Since he has all his marbles, he can tell you himself what he needs. In the evening, we need to do everything in reverse."

"That has got to be a terrible financial drain on your family, him being as young as you say. How people can possibly plan for this? Whew! The medical-business industry is going to make everyone destitute. Sorry, ma'am. Just a pet peeve of mine. I've seen too much of this kind of thing."

Elsabet forced her reservations aside in light of her dwindled options. "I'll be honest with you. Several people have turned me down because I can't pay what a nursing job would. And I might need to summon help at odd times. I can't afford to call nine-one-one because he's taken a spill."

She noted the man's physical attributes surreptitiously. He was huge, but not fat. Six feet, maybe six-one, big shoulders and chest that tapered to his waist. Perhaps the man was a gym rat or did weight training at home. Obviously, he could easily help with her husband's care—that is, if he would. She tried to ignore his faint oily scent. And that he felt *off*—something her intuition just couldn't decipher. Otherwise, he was perfect.

And what other choice did she have?

Warily she continued to question Ben. "Another thing that worries me," she said, trying to sound nonchalant. "Injuries from falls. What if they think I'm abusing him? Even if he insists that's not the case, they might not believe us. Patient abuse gets lots of press. They could say that he was at my mercy."

Ben threw back his head and laughed merrily. "You? That's a good one. I wouldn't worry about that. You're way too small."

She couldn't help noticing how handsome he was. Beautiful green eyes, teeth that betrayed a pricey orthodontist, and full

lips too perfectly shaped for a man. Acne scared skin and a deep wrinkle that bisected his low jutting brows corrected that impression, however, making him look rugged. He was bald, although she couldn't tell why—shaving or simply his genes. When she spoke, she noticed he turned his head slightly. Ah, a hearing aid, the tiniest kind, yet he seemed to miss nothing. Age? She couldn't pin that down within fifteen years. No wedding ring, earrings, or visible tattoos—whether gang, prison, or just guy stuff. Her excellent olfactory nerve again picked up his unusual scent.

“Would you mind telling me what you do when you're not helping patients like mine?”

“I'm a mechanic. Work out of my place in the country. I specialize in vintage and antique cars, doing routine maintenance, repairs, and restoration. Since I'm the boss, I can choose my own hours. That includes helping folks who need some assistance. It's what the Bible says we're supposed to be doing, right? Like the old lady whose toilet wouldn't stop leaking. Took twenty minutes to spot the problem and fix it. She paid for the part and insisted on paying me with stuff that she baked.”

“Do you have any family?”

“Did.”

That she decided not to pursue. “Where did you study medical assistance?”

“Well, first off, there's nothing medical about what I do. Like you said, what forces many folks into institutions is that they can't walk or attend to their personal needs unassisted. And the family, especially the wives, aren't strong enough to lift them. That I can do. Provide muscle. But I don't do injections or procedures, you understand.”

“And you're so strong because...”

“Lady, do you have any idea how much engines weigh? When do you want me to start?”

She relaxed. “Right away, if you can. If we wait any longer, he'll try to get himself out of bed. I brought him home yesterday. We've done the best we could retrofitting the house. He can pull himself up with the bar that hangs from the track. He

thinks he can push his legs over the edge, but if he leans forward too much—” She paused, gulped her anxiety, and switched gears. “The mattress is lowered to the same height as his wheelchair.”

She resumed ringing her hands. Becoming aware she was ticking, she thrust them into her pockets. “I’m afraid his arms will get weak, and he’ll go down like a ton of bricks. And then there’s the bathroom...”

“Why don’t I meet him? You introduce me, then leave us to talk man to man. Guys have things they just can’t say in front of their women.”

After leaving the bedroom, Elsabet killed time wiping the kitchen counter that didn’t need cleaning. The men’s first encounter stretched endlessly. She heard the murmur of voices, the sound of the shower, some spontaneous laughter. In time, the bedroom door opened, and her husband wheeled himself into the kitchen. His hair looked freshly washed, and he was dressed in clean sweats, socks, and his LL Bean moose hide mocs.

“This guy has a vintage Morgan!” He grinned at his new helper. They exchanged smiles like old buddies. “Mother, can we keep him?”

The men laughed easily. She managed a smile.

“That’s up to him,” Elsabet said, turning to Ben. “And we need to talk about wages.”

The guy smiled broadly, resting his hand on her husband’s shoulder. “He already told me what he can pay. That works for me. I’m not short of cash, and I enjoy helping people. One thing—and I hope you won’t take this wrong—no paper trail. I get paid in folding green. You know, to cover my gas and, shall we say, expenses?”

A tiny voice niggled somewhere in her brain. Was she one hundred percent sure that this guy was honest? That he wouldn’t rob her blind the minute she took off for work? Or relaxed her vigilance? Should she lock up the few valuables that she hadn’t sold? In her desperation, she hadn’t even thought about asking for references.

“One more thing,” Ben added. “I prefer to find my own clients. So, if you don’t mind, please don’t give my name to your friends. You know. Demand being what it is. I don’t have time to field all the inquiries.”

“Well. Sure. Okay. I understand.” Elsabet felt her stomach squeeze into a strangled ball. There wasn’t time to check him out further, and she supposed she could research the man after the fact. But would he quit if he found that she had?

Glancing at her watch, she pushed those reservations out of her mind. If this worked out, the guy would be perfect. And using him would buy her time to research benefits she might have missed. Paying in cash happened all the time, right? That wasteful government wasn’t helping her one bit. All her family had ever done was pay, pay, and pay. Besides, her helper’s relationship with the IRS was none of her business. And she wouldn’t need him enough hours to trigger social security issues. If asked, she was to say he was a volunteer whose expenses she covered. And that was incredibly cheaper than anything else her exhaustive research had yielded.

“Would you be okay with letting me have a key to the house? That’s much safer than leaving it unlocked. And only an idiot would hide a key outside. That’s thief bait.”

“Um...I’d need to have a spare made. In the meantime, I’ll be here in the morning when you arrive.” She shook his hand, hoping that by doing so, she wasn’t sealing their fate.

Chapter 3

As Charlie waited for his escort to arrive, he reaffirmed his decision to focus on a positive outcome while refusing to acknowledge his ticking bomb. Denial, he had decided, was essential for his peace of mind. Every minute of every day was a gift, which he could invest in blessings or in despair. What would Charlie's fallen Vietnam buddies give for even one of his past forty years? Three hundred sixty-five times forty...

He pulled his attention to Friday's activities with fresh appreciation. The chatty volunteer from Dietary would visit with next week's menus, and Optometry had sent word that his new bifocals were ready. First, however, was PT. Or was it OT? He couldn't keep the acronyms straight, but he loved the experience. The therapists had the unending patience to charm even the crankiest patient. Charlie was making friends with residents from Skilled Nursing and short-timers from various medical units. They urged him to visit as soon as he was allowed off his own ward. One fellow had whispered details about how to apply for a motorized wheelchair, but warned that he'd need to pass a driver's exam. And he wasn't kidding.

Charlie's glance lit on Vincent DePasquali's bed, which now was crisply made for the next Hospice patient. A drycleaner's bag encased a patriotic quilt similar to Charlie's. Sadly, he realized it had been Mr. D's, who could not take it home. His reflection was jolted by an approaching male voice, belting out "What A Friend We Have In Jesus."

As the uniformed escort bounced into his room, Charlie acknowledged that this guy had to be the jolliest man on the planet. An official name badge clipped to his collar bore his likeness and identified him as *Zeke Something-or-other*, the surname being too long and complicated for Charlie to decipher. Cleanly shaven from his chin to the back of his neck, his entire head shined like an object d'art. Gold-rimmed glasses would have given him a scholarly look, had it not been for his impish expression. Dressed in khakis and a navy Escort shirt, he oozed exuberance. "Mr. A! Are you ready for the exercise chamber of horrors? For a small fee, I'll take you to McDonalds instead. Just kidding! Need help with those sneaks? A quick pit stop? A dancing girl for your lap?"

Charlie could only imagine the exasperation his former teachers must have felt as this happy soul entertained the whole class. He'd heard, however, that inside every navy escort jacket was a veteran in the final stages of rehab. Having progressed to this level of trust, Zeke would soon graduate to a halfway house and a job on the outside. The temptations would be vast, and the challenges to stay healthy and employed monumental, but the success rate of this VA program was impressive. And people like Mr. Bounce-Bounce-Bounce were obviously high on the prospect of living life clean, sober, and drug-free.

Even though the VA was a governmental entity and therefore forbid overt evangelism, Zeke let everyone know that Jesus, his personal savior, had bought his redemption from a despicable life. And he never shied away from telling complete strangers how lucky he was to escape the clutches of drugs. Charlie, the product of ultra-conservative country Protestants that quietly let the minister lead all the prayers, vacillated between annoyance and guilt. He had to keep reminding himself that there were many different pathways to God.

If this guy's route worked for him, and he could help others, well, amen.

With a flourish, Zeke whisked an escort wheelchair to the side of Charlie's bed and unfolded it. He flipped the footrests out of the way then locked the wheel brake. "Your chariot awaits, my good man." Skillfully he maneuvered Charlie into

the seat, anticipating just how much help to provide. Footrests flipped back into position, he guided Charlie's feet onto them and released the brakes. "Onward!" he said and started for the door.

"Zeke? Could you hold up a minute?" They stopped. "I'm curious about something. A little boy, looks to be about five, had been visiting Mr. D. Do you have any idea who he is?"

Zeke abandoned the handles and coming around to the front of the wheelchair, squatting to Charlie's eye level. "Poor little kid. I feel so sorry for him. Would love to take him on rounds. We all would. We sneak him piggy-back rides when nobody's looking."

"Why do you have to be so careful not to be seen?"

"You kidding? Drop the kid and the family will sue our asses and the VA into the next century. He's related to an old man down the hall on the right. We'll pass the room on the way to the elevator."

"Do you think we could stop on our way? Just for a minute? I don't want to be late for PT, and I know you have other patients to escort. But if I could just introduce myself to the family..."

"No! You don't want to go there. The mother—" He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Jesus, forgive me for being judgmental, but she is a bitch. If anyone tries to approach that little kid, she goes off. She wants no part of *no one*." He hung his head and closed his eyes. "Lord, forgive me. 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" He looked up and grinned. "Romans 14:19."

Charlie nodded, resigned to making an alternate plan. "Well, maybe we could just glide by slowly. Let me glance into the room. If the child's there, give him a smile or a wave. That is, if Mom isn't looking."

"We can do that."

Zeke not only sauntered down the hall at an extremely slow pace, but managed to stop outside the room in question. "How'd we miss that? You're going to trip on that shoe," Zeke said, sounding genuinely concerned. Parking Charlie's wheel-

chair exactly in front of the door, he bent to improve upon the situation. “And your sock is all twisted.”

Charlie grinned, suspecting that Zeke had unfastened the Velcro before leaving the room.

At first, Charlie gave Zeke’s ministrations his undivided attention, and only after a few moments, glanced at the name on the door. Slipped into the space provided for names, he read *Murdock*. No first name appeared. That made sense to Charlie who had been largely unsuccessful in getting all but his most intimate providers to address him as anything other than Mr. Alderfer or sir. Respect for the veterans was of paramount importance, down to the tiniest detail.

Nonchalantly, Charlie glanced about the single-occupancy room. An elderly man with a halo of silvery hair slept upright, propped on mounded pillows. An oxygen camula was affixed to his nose, its line disappearing into the equipment behind his bed. A leather recliner was angled beside the bed on the left. An upholstered visitor’s chair with oak arm rests sat perpendicular to the foot of the bed. Nobody occupied the chairs.

“That’s good,” Charlie indicated to Zeke, who resumed his position to continue their journey to the elevator bank.

When a whiff of exotic fragrance permeated the air, Charlie signaled Zeke to stop for a moment. He sniffed. What was that heavenly scent? Such a departure from the antiseptic smells that he tried to ignore. Floral. But which one? His wife Emma would have known...

A woman whom he’d never seen before was engaging two nurses in animated conversation. Leaning her left elbow on the elevated counter, she punctuated her comments with a manicured finger. She was very tall, but small boned, with blonde hair anchored with a tortoise barrette at the nape of her neck. Unlike staff, she wore business attire—a raspberry suit and high heels. Charlie couldn’t help but notice that her short skirt revealed perfect legs when she leaned over the counter to hand the head nurse a bundle of papers.

He swiveled and mouthed to Zeke, “Who is she?”

With that, the woman turned, sizing them up. Her features, lovely as a Botticelli Madonna, contrasted sharply with her hos-

tile expression. She impaled Zeke with icy eyes. Even from a distance, Charlie could feel her ice-pick glare.

Zeke dropped his gaze to the floor. “Later,” he murmured as he resumed their mission. Feeling chastised, Charlie averted his eyes, focusing on his lap until they had passed her and turned left toward the elevators.

“That,” Zeke said, “is our mystery woman. Get in line, man. She’s got all the guys plotting and scheming. Word is, she works in the business office, IT, HR—some back office job. One of the guys thinks she’s a temp. She hasn’t been around very long or we would have noticed. Hey! You’re a nice guy—single, tall and good looking with all that hair. Maybe she’d go for a mature fella, rather than a young stud. You’ve got class, education—”

Charlie shook his head and batted his hand at the air, letting Zeke’s words drift away. Single. He hated that word. He wore the status of widower like a badge of honor. Emma—she was a beauty, and so tiny he had to stoop to put his chin on her head. She’d hop onto the step stool, hold out her arms, and say “Hug?” In spite of his height, their beautiful daughters barely hit average. Susan wanted, with all her adolescent heart and soul, to be a ballerina, but by thirteen was entirely too well endowed. And Jeannette, who longed to be a fashion model, was much too short. If only Emma could see their daughters now—one a gifted teacher and one a leading scientist—Maybe she could.

Charlie gave one last thought to the object of Zeke’s matchmaking effort. Emma would have suggested that the lady wasn’t hostile but simply shy, preoccupied, sad, or having a bad day. That being too beautiful could be a curse. Men would be afraid to approach her or would pursue her like a trophy. Women would be jealous and mean, and the business world would not take her seriously. Emma was oblivious to human nature’s dark side. The elevator whooshed open, its occupants saving Charlie from more of Zeke’s schemes.

Zeke pushed the down button. When finally alone, Charlie’s thoughts turned to the boy and the old man. He asked, “Murdock—any idea about his first name?”

“Don’t know if I’m allowed to say that it’s Robert.”



Jonathan wandered the long Hospice corridors, oblivious to the familiar surroundings and caring adults who said kind words. Peeking into his grandfather’s room, he saw that Grandpa was sleeping. He did that most of the time. Jonathan didn’t go into the room. He walked farther until he came to the small family lounge. There he found his mother asleep, her feet propped on the coffee table, a magazine upside down on her chest. He continued past a room where patients in elongated wheelchairs were watching a musical program, some surrounded by people in regular clothes. Everywhere, nurses were coaxing very sick patients with pudding in small paper cups. Beyond the first nurses’ station, he turned to the right, down a short corridor that ended in the largest activity room. People sat at square tables, playing games. One family was doing a puzzle with millions of pieces. An old lady had just baked cookies. His mouth watered.

“Have one.” Jonathan jumped. “Here, have several.” The woman, who must be a grandmother, mounded three warm chocolate chip cookies onto a napkin. “Want milk with that?” She opened the fridge and pulled out a carton. “Growing boys need lots of milk.” She poured some into a flowered paper cup. “Help yourself to more cookies, if you’re mom says it’s okay.” She gathered her purse and umbrella and scurried down the hall, accepting thanks from the staff who were always saying how much they appreciated volunteers.

Jonathan went to the window and set his cup on the sill then devoured the cookies in between sips. From this favorite window, he scanned the beautiful grounds and the country beyond the curving driveways. At this height, five floors up, he imagined that he was a bird. He would soar high above the farmers’ fields, away from the hospital and all its bad smells. Heaven—how high did Gram say that was? He watched the sky as the last rain clouds skittered away in a stiff breeze. Streamers of sunshine beamed through a hole in the clouds. It looked as if

someone was looking for him. Was Gram up there somewhere? He hoped that she could not see him down here. He had not meant to hurt her. He was just trying to help. He should have told Mr. D. sooner. Now Mr. D. had gone somewhere else. What was it that man in Mr. D's room said? That Mr. D. was down in the basement?

Something blue caught Jonathan's attention. Several patient rooms were in the short corridor that connected the activity room with the main hall. A dark haired woman in a brown uniform was pushing a large cart into the hall. Jonathan could see it was heaped with colored stuff. The woman called to someone in another patient's room. "I'll run this laundry down to the basement on my way out."

She parked the cart in an alcove and entered the activity room. "Break time!" she sing-songed. "Cookies! My, aren't we lucky?" Jonathan recognized her immediately as someone whom he saw every day. "Are they good?" she asked him. Jonathan bobbed his head. "Mmmmm! And she made us fresh coffee."

The lady plucked a mug from the cupboard, filled it, and sank into a chair at the table. As she turned her attention to a magazine with pictures of people's faces on the cover, Jonathan slipped out of the room. Spotting the blue cart with its mountains of laundry, he looked both ways. He flattened himself against the back wall of the alcove where no one could see him. He lifted what he recognized were many pajamas, just like the ones Mr. D. wore. Grasping the cart by its sturdy rim, he somersaulted into it, then buried himself in its depth. Snuggled into its soft warmth, he waited. In time, soothed by the milk and warm cookies, he fell asleep.

Movement startled Jonathan awake. Concealed in the large laundry cart, he remained very still. Hearing the chatter and phone conversations off to the right, he knew they were passing the nurses' station. He was getting a ride down the main corridor. Momentarily he recognized the whoosh of the glass doors that opened magically, beyond which lay the elevators he and Mom rode every day. Instead of approaching the elevators, the cart continued on its trajectory, as if toward his grandfather's

room. However, it stopped abruptly, made a sharp turn, and then stopped again. Keys jingled. An elevator door whooshed open.

“Done for the day?” someone leaving the elevator said to his unknown driver.

“Just have to make this linen run down to the basement.” Bump, bump. They were inside. Keys jingling again, followed by the unmistakable motion of the descending elevator. After the doors opened again and his driver pushed out the cart, Jonathan became completely disoriented. The wheels protested as they hit many bumps. Doors opened and closed with swinging crashes. He could hear machines, clanks and bumps, getting louder, then softer as they proceeded. Finally they stopped.

“Just leave it over there. I’ll get it later,” somebody said. The voice was not familiar. Jonathan waited for what seemed like a very long time and finally peeked out from under the pajamas. The room was enormous, like a huge garage. Not pretty like upstairs. Giant washers and dryers lined the wall, like where his mom took their clothes when their washer broke down. The place smelled like clothes-washing soap. If Mr. D. had been taken somewhere in the basement, he must be someplace else. Jonathan had to find him. Maybe he wasn’t too late. Mr. D. couldn’t be in the basement *and* in heaven. Maybe he could still tell him his terrible secret.

Scanning the room, he quickly realized he was alone. Maybe everyone had gone home. How long had he napped? There were no windows and no way to tell if it was still daytime. Where, oh where was he? If only he could find Mr. D. He’d know what to do. Abandoning the linen cart, Jonathan looked for a door. A huge metal one looked like a good choice. He pushed. Nothing happened. He pushed harder, putting his shoulder into the effort. His worn sneakers slipped on the smooth concrete floor. Again, nothing. Panicked, he yanked at the knob. To his surprise, it swung inward easily when he happened to twist and pull at the same time. He peered out. A long, dimly lit corridor looked like a tunnel, its walls tiled like a bathroom, only with bigger squares. The floor was made of bricks. Overhead, huge pipes that looked like overgrown spaghetti

hung as far as he could see. Among them hung big wheels and other contraptions.

His footsteps and even his breath seemed to echo as he crept down the broad tunnel. He came upon another pair of metal doors. Twisting the knob, he pushed. When the door wouldn't budge, he twisted and pushed harder. From somewhere down the tunnel, loud footsteps echoed. Jonathan panicked. Only a monster could make that much noise. Desperately, he worked at the knob. The door relented an inch at a time. Not enough to let him squeeze through, he kept pushing, enlarging the crack. Cold air and a strong, pungent smell smacked his face. Bracing his feet and pushing with both hands, he expanded the opening just wide enough to wiggle into the room.

Once inside, the door crashed behind him. Then he saw it. A lumpy object on a shiny table, covered in a sheet. And feet. Bluish feet stuck out from under the sheet. Petrified, he whirled to regain the door and escape, but rough hands grabbed his shoulders. It was too late.



Susan Alderfer McHugh, Charlie's oldest daughter, was hopelessly lost. She thought she had understood the volunteer's directions at the information desk, but realized she'd been too impatient and distracted to remember the details. Her flight from San Diego had been cancelled, the next one available wasn't nonstop and her rental car reservation had gone missing. Rectifying that was a major hassle. Instead of arriving by ten, it was now after six in the evening.

As she approached yet one more junction in the endless maze of building-connecting corridors, she came face to face with a stern looking woman in a maintenance uniform. She clutched a small boy by his upper arm, and she was half marching, half towing him toward a sign that read *Police*. The child, who looked the same age as Susan's kindergarteners, was petrified, crying and struggling. Susan didn't think. She reacted.

"What are you doing to that child?" she demanded. "You're hurting him. Can't you see that he's terrified?"

The woman scowled. “I found this kid in an area that’s restricted even to some of our staff. He won’t tell me who he is or what he was doing there. I’m going to let our police sort it out.” With that the child thrashed harder, escalating his attempt to escape. Tears spurted off his thick lashes and splashed on the tiles. He howled like a wounded animal.

“Hold on a minute. As a teacher, I know that the way you’re restraining him borders on abuse. If you don’t stop immediately, I’ll call nine-one-one. Let the state police sort this out. How’s that going to sit with the VA’s director and reputation?” The women glared at each other. Relenting, Susan broke eye contact first and softened her approach. “Let me try talking to him.”

Ignoring the other woman’s fuming protests, Susan stooped to the child’s level. “If you’ll stop struggling for a minute, I’ll try to help you. My name is Miss Susan. I’m a teacher. I know lots of little boys just your age. Can you tell me your name?”

The child stopped resisting, but volunteered nothing. Susan continued to gaze into his beautiful little face.

“It’s okay to be scared. Nobody wants to hurt you. We just want to find out where you belong. Did you come to the hospital with your family? Or do you live in the neighborhood?”

Nothing.

“Well, I have an idea.” She pointed up to a box at the ceiling. “See that?” All three looked up. “I’m thinking the hospital has a PA system. Someone could send a message all over the hospital to tell your family where you are. Why don’t we walk together down this hall and ask a nice policeman how—”

That brought an immediate response as the youngster howled, shook his head no, and stamped his feet. “Okay. Then we won’t go to the police. We’ll think of something else.” She waited until the boy calmed a little. She looked up at the woman who towered over her from her crouched position. “Maybe he’ll let me walk him down to the information desk in the lobby. I passed volunteers there. They should know how to page his parents.”

The employee shook her head. “They’ve gone home by now. Best bet would be the nurses’ desk on an inpatient ward. That’s the building at the end of the complex.”

Susan focused on the child’s face again. “Why don’t we find a nurse or a doctor who knows how to help kids who get lost? Maybe we could find some food along the way. I don’t know about you, but I’m really hungry.” The child didn’t agree, but didn’t mount a fresh protest either.

The employee jabbed her hand on her hip and poked a finger toward Susan. “Now just a minute. I have no idea who you are. If I turn him over to you, I’d hate to think how many procedures I’d be violating. How do I know that you’re not some kidnapper or pervert?”

If Susan hadn’t been a teacher, she might have been insulted, but she knew better. Some of the most innocent-looking people in the world did terrible things to children. She opened her purse and dug out her wallet. “Here. That’s my California driver’s license. And here’s an ID from the school where I work. Two credit cards, a library card—oh, and here’s my airline boarding pass. I just flew in to see my father. He’s in Hospice.”

The mention of Hospice had a soothing effect on the employee. “Well, I don’t know—”

“I’ll give you my cell phone number. You can call me and I’ll let you know our progress. If you have a number, I’ll call you, if you prefer.”

The woman sighed. “Okay. But if my supervisor finds out, I’ll get fired. If I didn’t have to pick up my own kids, I wouldn’t even consider...”

“Please. But before I go, fill me in on where you found him. His parents are sure to ask.”



Much to Susan’s surprise, the child took her hand without resistance. An employee exiting a room whose door read Information Technology directed her through the corridors to a central location. She had sorted and discarded several options to

orient herself then simply asked where there might be a restaurant. That brought a snicker and directions to a place referred to as the canteen. As they hiked what felt like a quarter mile of corridors, Susan spotted a sign that read Food Court. It dawned on her that the child seemed to pick up the pace and was, in fact, leading her instead of the other way around.

Sure enough, as they came to the Food Court, he veered toward the entry. Immediately, she smelled the food. Her stomach grumbled.

Her various attempts at drawing the boy into conversation had yielded nothing. He remained mute and was no help in locating his family. *Food*, she thought. *Food might soften him up*. She stooped, gently touching the child's face. He looked in her eyes. "Are you hungry too?" To her delight, he nodded his head yes.

Working their way through the cafeteria line, she chose a chef salad, pie, and ice tea for herself while he pointed to the hot dog, macaroni, and fries. Milk, she decided, was a must. She paid for their food and selected a remote corner booth. The position of the child's bench would make it impossible for him to bolt around her. She quickly realized that wouldn't happen as he gave the meal his undivided attention. He devoured the hotdog, roll, macaroni, every fry, and the last drop of milk. When he looked longingly at her cherry pie, she passed that to him as well.

After they finished, she gazed at him benignly. He had calmed down so completely that she felt it was safe to try again. "It's time for us to find your family. I'm guessing that you know your way around here, just a little. Am I right?" The boy looked down at the table. "That's okay. In fact, that's great. Do you think you can lead me to your family? I suppose we could ask for some help—"

At the latter suggestion, the boy's eyes widened with fear. Much to her amazement, he grabbed their tray and headed for the trash can. He pushed their waste paper through the slot and then, on tiptoe, jockeyed the empty tray onto the space provided. Either the kid ate fast food often or he came here a lot.

Reaching back for her hand, he tugged her toward the corridor and turned in the opposite direction from which they had come.

A map on the wall indicated that this was the way to the inpatient building. Ultimately, they came to a break in the one-story connecting corridor. A quick left placed them in front of an elevator bank. One opened, they got in, and, without hesitation, the boy pushed a button. Even as they exited and needed to choose their direction—twice—the child didn't hesitate.

Susan peered down the hall and immediately realized that she was in Hospice, the very ward where she'd had previously visited her father. Now, if the child just knew which room—

It dawned on her that the entire hospital should have been looking for him. She hesitated, pulling back into the elevator alcove. Surely, someone should have approached her. And she should have heard a lost child announcement over the PA.

Where the woman came from, Susan didn't notice, but she pounced as swiftly as any lioness on prey. "What are you doing with my child!" A demand, not a question. She turned back to the boy. "Jonathan, you get back to the room. Immediately! Go!"

With frightening fury, she backed Susan into the wall across from the elevators. Horrified, Susan looked for help, but they were separated from the functional corridors.

"Answer me! I demand to know what you doing with my boy! Where did you take him? I should—" The woman stepped forward, fists clinched.

Susan, only five feet four, still towered over the scrawny woman, yet she felt totally unprepared to defend herself. The woman was junkyard dog tough, her skinny body contrasting her rough demeanor. Susan bet that she learned her bravado brawling with brothers. What came to Susan's rescue was her own temper. Her father always said it would get her into trouble one day, and she'd spent a lifetime cultivating gentility. Now something snapped.

Hands on her hips she stomped into the woman's personal space. "How dare you accuse me, when you're the one who can't keep track of your own little boy? How old is he anyway? Four? Five?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Do you know

where they found him? In the morgue. The morgue! Do you know where that is? A good mile from here, underground, through a labyrinth of corridors. Machinery. Plumbing. Heating systems.” She was guessing at the dangerous mechanicals, but was unable to stop herself. “The individual who found him was about to turn him over to the police. I’m sure they would have called Children’s Services, and you’d have had a tough time explaining how such a small child ended up in harm’s way. And would they have even known how to find you?”

“When I met him, he was being escorted to the VA’s police station. Your son was terrified. Totally freaked. What’s that all about? Do you have a history of domestic violence? Do police break up fights at your house routinely? And he was starving! He tucked away enough food in the canteen to satisfy a ditch digger. And you have the audacity to confront me? As a teacher, I’ve seen bad parenting, neglected and abused children, but this—do you even know how far he had to wander to end up in the *morgue*?”

A woman, whose badge identified her as a nursing supervisor, rounded the corner. “Is there a problem here?”

Susan gathered her professional presence and voice. “Not at all. I believe we’re done chatting.”

With that, she turned and stalked down the hall in search of her father, heart hammering, whole body sweating. Rethinking, she detoured into a bathroom and locked herself in a stall to calm down.

Chapter 4

Susan was exhausted when she finally entered her father's room. One look at his delighted face, however, swept the unpleasant encounter out of her mind.

"Surprise, Daddy!"

"Oh, my dear angel! What are you doing here? You're supposed to be at a conference in Sacramento. Oh my, that was a ruse, wasn't it?"

"If I'd told you I was coming, you'd have done everything in your power to tell me it wasn't necessary. Know what I think? You're a fraud! You look absolutely wonderful." She bent to kiss his florid cheek and ruffle his perfect thatch of white hair.

"It's the quality care. Do you know they have three nurses for every four patients in Hospice? I'm scared to death they'll kick me out. As a former roommate told me, this train doesn't schedule round trips."

"Is that a possibility? Making you leave?"

"I don't think so. My team has quite a program worked out for me, and they're tough. True, I'm getting stronger and regaining muscle tone that I lost. Each day in bed requires three days of rehab.

"Susan, they're into the quality of my life as long as it lasts. And I plan to make the most of it. I can eat whatever I can handle—there's no special diet. I can have visitors, participate in a bunch of activities, and even go to some off-campus events. It's like being at college without taking classes."

“There’s got to be a down side—”

“Yeah, honey, there’s a problem. That’s one reason why they’re keeping me. Have they leveled with you about my medical condition?”

She sighed. “About the other—you know...”

“They told me that they won’t kid me. My prognosis is ‘if-fy.’ As I understand it, the other aneurysm could blow any time. Or not. They won’t speculate. I think it’s too close to my heart or some vital organ. If I get really healthy, maybe there’s something that they can do. Or I can just wait and see. Would you and your sister like to flip a coin for the Corvette? I don’t think I’ll ever drive it again. I don’t want the responsibility for harming other people. Unless, of course, they can fix me.”

“One thing at a time, Dad. You just keep healing.”

“My new friends in Hospice keep dying, but I’ve met guys on other floors who are pretty sharp but can’t live on their own. Diabetic amputees, war wounded patients, MS patients, heart, strokes, and the like. As a Vietnam vet, I’m considered a youngster. Imagine. We’re having a good time swapping war stories, playing Bingo, going to chapel—”

Charlie looked at his watch. “I assume you’ll stay at the house. Before Jeannette returned to Atlanta, she and my neighbor arranged for a woman to clean as needed. The neighbor’s son is mowing the grass. The fridge is empty, but my car’s in the garage, keys on the hook. Why don’t you turn in your rental and use the Buick or the Vet?”

Susan grinned. “If I know my little sister, Jeannette will have everything ship-shape, complete with lists on the counter.” She looked at her watch. “What time are they kicking me out?”

“They aren’t. Twenty-four seven, remember? But I am. By the way, if you’re hungry there’s what they call a food court downstairs. Guys here call it the canteen.”

Susan suddenly remembered her previous experience and recounted it in detail. When she finished, she realized he had a strange look on his face.”

“That little boy must be our Jonathan. His grandfather’s a patient on this floor. My gut tells me there’s quite a story there. Even though Jonathan came to see my old roommate for a cou-

ple weeks, Mr. D. couldn't get him to talk. We assumed he was mute or brain damaged or something."

"Something's not normal," she said, describing his terror at the mention of the police.

"I've heard, from a reliable source who must not be quoted, that the family has a 'situation' that's been in the newspapers. Privacy issues prohibit staff from saying anything about it."

Susan shrugged. "Might explain the boy's behavior. Do you know the family's name?"

"The patient is Robert Murdock. The boy's name is Jonathan. He probably has a different last name, ditto the mother who accosted you. She would be Murdock's daughter. She might go by a husband's name. Wait. I remember. The name's Kepley. If you could find anything out, maybe that would help me communicate with him. Something is troubling him deeply. Perhaps I could help."

"I'll Google the name. See if anything pops."

Charlie laughed.

"What?" Susan asked.

"I was just thinking about your confrontation with Jonathan's mother. I feel sorry for her, taking you on. For all your dignity, education, and professionalism, you're like your grandmother, not your mother—a lioness when it comes to protecting little children."

"Yeah. Pity the stork keeps missing our house."



Susan slipped the key into the lock of her childhood home. With the same old combination jiggle and turn, the tumbler re-vented. Funny, she thought. In California, she had a deadbolt and a security system. In this rural community, people rarely locked their doors unless they were traveling. The joke was that locks were good for keeping the wind from blowing doors open in the event of a storm.

She stepped into the sprawling rancher's living room, the familiar sense of loss grabbing her gut. A lamp on a timer

glowed in the corner, just as it had when she was a teen. It would go off at 12:05, shortly after her Cinderella license expired for the night. She'd know she was in trouble if she turned onto their block and did not see the glow in the window. How she would pray that the bulb had burned out. It never had, yet her parents never scolded their responsible daughter.

She flipped on multiple lights to diminish the sad tricks her imagination played. Momentarily her mother would skim down the hall from their bedroom to greet her. She would be wearing her housecoat, a special gift from her father. She had hated the confines of her professional wardrobe, especially underwear straps. She would ditch her street clothes the minute that dinner was finished. The house was exactly as her mother had left it, kept by her dad like a shrine. It looked as if Mom would return any moment from work, shopping, or tending her garden. The only concession her father had made was to part with her clothes. Mom had insisted that women in need should have them after she didn't need them anymore. The housecoat, however, still hung in their closet.

Susan remembered one remarkable evening that symbolized her father's capacity to comfort her. A year before her mother's death, Susan had been summoned from college. Her mother had collapsed and been rushed to the hospital. As Susan drove home, tears nearly blinding her nighttime vision, she panicked over things left unsaid to her mother. Childish things she'd never confessed, gratitude for her patience during adolescence, love that she had failed to put into words. By the time she got home, visiting hours were over. She was distraught. Bursting into the house, the first thing she said to her dad wasn't a greeting. "Is she going to die?"

With a gentle smile, her dad had said in his even, quiet voice, "I don't think so. Not now." He was standing in the kitchen, still dressed in his trademark spiffy clothes, his shock of graying hair neatly combed. What he said next did more to soothe her than anything else he could have come up with. He pointed to the basket that sat on the cabinet beside the phone. "Would you like a banana?"

She had stared at the basket that sat between the phone and a hurricane lamp. *A banana? He's offering me a banana? How serious could this emergency be if he wants me to have a banana?* "A glass of sherry, perhaps," he had continued. "And a few crackers?" As if an afterthought he added, "We'll see your mother in the morning. She was better when I left and doesn't want you to worry. She's concerned that I make sure you have enough blankets. We're supposed to bring her the stuff that she put on a list. It's on the dining room table."

Fifteen years. Where had the time gone? Susan was so busy with her own life across the country, yet she could not possibly face the prospect of losing her dad. In her heart, no matter her location, *home* would always be here. She could even delude herself into thinking that included Mom. The phone rang.

"About time you showed up," her sister Jeannette started without any greeting. "Details. I want details. And how did Dad look?" They talked for an hour and finally hung up.



Susan smiled, remembering the plaques she and Jeannette had designed and installed on their old bedroom doors the year after their mother's passing. DAD'S B and B. The girls had given their father an ultimatum. The shrine stops at these doors. That first day they had divided their childhood stuff into three categories: pitch, pack, or take home. Piles were boxed. Gone were the burlap-covered bulletin boards from which hung dry corsages and high school mementos. Childish furniture was moved to the basement to be advertised in the Merchandiser. Adult-size mattresses and daybeds with trundle pullouts for little grandchildren were delivered. The walls were attacked with colors other than pink that coordinated with new curtains and coverlets.

Charlie was pressed into the adventure, cajoled into accepting that their childhood was over and wouldn't return. One wall in each room was devoted to photos that he selected. They spent two days matting, framing, and hanging his favorites.

Charlie proclaimed that his B and B was now perfect, and that out-of-town families had better show up. Often.

Now, from the closet, Susan withdrew a collapsible luggage stand, set it in the corner, and opened her bag. She unearthed her cosmetics, laptop, and prescription meds from her carryon. Before adjusting the privacy blinds, she scanned the old neighborhood. Beyond the rural acre lots with the houses enjoying a substantial setback, she could still identify the neighbors' activities. Early-to-beds' houses were dark while other bedrooms glowed bluish light. Old Mr. Greer, the neighborhood night owl, could be seen in silhouette behind his sheer curtain, reading a book.

Susan sighed. Of course, Jeannette was right. A retirement home would kill Dad as surely as an arterial explosion. His roots were as deep as that hundred-year oak that the developer had wisely spared. Perhaps live-in help. The lower level apartment was handicap accessible.

Susan stripped off her pantsuit and stepped into the Jack and Jill bathroom that connected the sisters' bedrooms. She luxuriated in the hot water, lathering bath gel and shampoo until all trace of her transcontinental challenge circled the drain.

As she toweled, she made mental lists. On top: Resist turning Dad into her child. Only then, with her brain sufficiently warmed and feeling as if she had minimal control, did she remember Robert Murdock. Hair wrapped turban-like and snuggled into the terrycloth robe that she kept in the closet, she trotted barefoot to the opposite side of the house. In her parents' bedroom wing, a small spare room that abutted the living room wall served as her father's office. This might have been Mom's sewing or hobby room, but she hadn't been the crafty type. Her love was the garden. All that stuff was still in the garage, except for her books that lined the top shelf.

Flipping on the computer, Susan half expected her practical sister to have discontinued the Internet service. She watched its machinations as she absently toweled her hair. The evening was more humid than warm, but the scent of approaching rain meant uncomfortable sleeping. Retracing her steps, she studied the thermostat and set the AC. By the time she returned, the PC

was ready. She double-clicked the Internet icon. Much to her relief, it opened. She Googled Robert Murdock then waited. She blinked. Rising from her chair, her towel slipped unnoticed to the floor. There were dozens of entries. Could they all be *her* Robert Murdock? A few quick clicks answered that question. They were.

Opening one desk drawer after another, she rummaged for a telephone directory. Not finding one, she Googled the newspaper's name. That produced a directory and phone numbers that ultimately led her to Archives. She grabbed the phone. Dialed. Connected with a man who either had the time or the patience to talk with a lady. "How can I get copies of all the articles you've published on the Robert Murdock case?" she asked him. She waited impatiently while he checked billing records.

"Since your household subscribes, just go to our website. Following the prompts, enter the account number that's on your bill, then search for the articles listed by subject or the reporter who covered the story."

In no time, Susan found what she needed. Transfixed, she absorbed the unfolding drama with growing alarm. What had her father stumbled into? Was he inserting himself into a dangerous situation? She'd been too absorbed to notice that her feet had fallen asleep until she lurched for the printer. Forcing herself to be calm, she arranged the articles sequentially to share with her dad.



Early sunshine played on Charlie's wall, his waking thought being of Susan. Guiltily, he felt better just knowing that she was in town. He imagined her making good use of Dad's B and B. Clever girls—easing him into a better reality. They'd been right. Now, instead of mourning the departure of his little girls, he would picture them as grown women. And the trundle beds held the promise of visiting grandchildren.

With the school year over and a free place to stay, Susan wouldn't be too inconvenienced by her visit. Of course, there was Susan's hand-wringing husband who would rather have

driven her cross-country than let her fly alone. An old-fashioned guy. Yeah, that suited Charlie just fine.

Since Charlie had all his marbles, thank you God, and all his legal stuff was in order, he and his daughter could have a real visit. The toughest part had been which of his girls should have power of attorney, AKA that pull-the-plug thing. He could only imagine how frantic they must have been, his being carted away, then air lifted, the surgery, and not expected to live. All the waiting and not knowing. Days that morphed into weeks. And Jeannette, his youngest, who lived in Atlanta, had a full-time career and two little children. Emergencies were an equal-opportunity affliction. He was more determined than ever to live a long, healthy life, if only to postpone their inevitable pain. If, among his carefully crafted personal business, there were any details he'd missed, he would tackle that the minute he got home. So many ifs—

“Charlie! You’re not supposed to get out of bed alone!” Mike’s bark was appropriate. “You could have waited a little while longer, or rung for assistance.”

One of these days, if he pushed independence too hard, Charlie’s newfound privileges could go poof. More seriously, what if he fell? An MS patient on another floor had warned him what would come next. Even if he could scramble undetected to a walker, chair, or his bed, someone always found out. Then he would be off to X-ray. Lots of poking and prodding. Lies to fabricate about how easily his older skin bruised. Myriad forms to fill out. Doctors to convince that he was okay. And staff that might get into trouble. Hell, a fall could even bring the suits from the executive office. A social worker. An attorney. He shuddered.

“Sorry, Mike. My mind was elsewhere. After sixty-eight years of getting around on my own, its reflexive.”

Mike’s attempt at maintaining a scowl dissolved into a grin. He chuckled.

A jumble of hushed voices approached Charlie’s door. With polished skill, two EMTs, trailed by two Hospice staffers, guided a gurney into the room. “Say hello to Mr. Kelly,” one of them said to Charlie and Mike. The ancient man smiled and

waved in slow motion, like a monarch acknowledging his subjects. Even from the distance of half the room, Charlie could see the brightest blue eyes, pinkest skin, and snowiest hair that he'd ever observed on a man. He looked positively angelic and wore a permanent smile.

Mr. Kelly appeared to be feather light as the EMTs gently lifted and positioned him onto the bed. In response to every question about his comfort, he said, "That's fine." "That's perfect." "That's good."

Charlie tried not to stare, but couldn't help noticing that Mr. Kelly was accompanied by paraphernalia. One EMT disconnected a portable oxygen tank and placed it back on the gurney.

The other brought a line from behind the bed then adjusted the nosepiece for his patient.

"Thank you," Mr. Kelly whispered, forcing volume from ancient vocal cords. "Every little bit helps."

Mike turned to Charlie. "Why don't we rocket through your morning routine? Shortly, there will be lots of newcomer activity, and you can miss the whole thing. Perhaps you'd like your breakfast in the dayroom. Catch *The Today Show* while you eat."

Charlie nodded toward his new roommate. "Did I get all this attention when they first brought me in?"

"More. Only you couldn't talk back."



After demolishing his breakfast and doing PT, Charlie had fallen asleep. As he awoke, he was startled to find Jonathan was peering at him. Having given up that the boy would ever return, especially after the uproar he'd caused getting lost, Charlie had tried to put him out of his mind. That hadn't worked. Jonathan had crept in unnoticed and stood at the foot of his bed. His profiled face turned toward Bill Kelly who was sound asleep.

"Hey, Jonathan. I'm so happy you came to see me. I was afraid you'd forgotten about me." The child had nothing to say—only continued staring at Charlie's new roommate.

“That’s Mr. Kelly. He arrived early this morning.” With that, Kelly opened his eyes and turned his head toward the two with a radiant smile. Charlie thought that he either truly loved people or that was simply his natural expression. Perhaps he was senile or, at his advanced age, was just missing the point. Mr. Kelly raised his forearm, as if his elbow were attached to the bed, and gave Jonathan his regal wave.

The boy looked back at Charlie as if for an explanation. “I’m told he’s a World War II veteran who served under one of our greatest generals, George Patton. No doubt he’ll have some remarkable stories to tell.”

Jonathan continued to stare, then touched his own nose.

“That plastic thing?” Jonathan nodded. “When we breathe in, our lungs take oxygen out of the air for our bodies to use. We all do it. Breathe in, then breathe out the stuff in the air that our bodies can’t use. When someone’s body can’t get enough oxygen out of the air, a little extra can be added. See Mr. Kelly’s little nose clip? It’s attached to a long tube. If you follow the tube with your eyes, you’ll see it’s attached to the wall behind his bed. Behind the wall, where we can’t see, is a pipe that goes to a big oxygen tank. Well, maybe it’s not a tank. I’ve never seen it, but that’s the idea. The doctor knows just how much oxygen to send Mr. Kelly.”

Charlie lifted the hem of his pillowcase and extracted an item that he’d been hiding. He dangled it by its thin strip of paper, allowing the teardrop-shaped silver object to swing in a circle. “Look what I found. Do you know a certain little boy who would like to have this?” Jonathan grinned. “Well, come get it.”

Shyly, the boy inched toward the bed. He extended his hand. Charlie placed the Hershey’s Kiss into his pudgy little palm. “Go ahead. You can eat it,” Charlie quoted Mr. D. Just as Jonathan was unpeeling the wrapper, he glanced over at Mr. Kelly. Horror overtook his face, and the Kiss fell to the floor. Charlie jerked to follow his stare, hardly knowing what to expect. Had his roommate convulsed, started to choke or vomit? Mr. Kelly was lying, relaxed in his bed, holding the nosepiece

of his oxygen equipment. Jonathan's face bled pure terror, as he scrambled and stumbled out of the room.

Charlie tried to call after him, but the child was long gone. Cautiously, he slipped off the side of his bed and, grasping his walker, released the wheel brake. With prudent caution but maximum speed, he pushed himself toward the door. He scanned the corridor to its vanishing point, but found no trace of the boy. Carefully, he retreated and wheeled the walker toward his new roommate. Fine plastic tubing, intended to hold the nosepiece in place, had slipped off his roommate's ear.

"Do you need some help with that thing? Or can I page the nurse?"

"Nah. Darned thing irritates my ears and nose. Sometimes I just need to give it a rest."

Charlie was perplexed. Why would something so innocuous spook Jonathan? If his grandfather was dying, surely the child was familiar with oxygen equipment.

Charlie parked the walker and sat on the edge of his mattress, noting what he'd accomplished. He had hustled himself out of bed and beat it to the door, without his muscles screaming for mercy. His exercise regime was working. Still, he vowed to pester for a motorized chair so that he could get around even faster. Staff was resisting, however, citing that motorized chairs promoted dependency, not stronger muscles. For now, though, he wanted what all guys lusted after—speed.



Susan always was a quick study, Charlie thought, as his daughter wheeled him to the opposite end of the ward, down a lesser corridor, and into a beautiful little lounge. It was tastefully furnished with an upholstered love seat, matching traditional wingback chairs, a cherry bookshelf, and end tables. Floor-length gauze curtains, dense flat-napped wall-to-wall carpet, and brass lamps with low-watt bulbs completed the cozy visitors' escape. From its size, Susan guessed that once it had been a single-occupancy patient's room. Two similar rooms, strategically placed out of the way, were furnished with single beds

instead of the love seat. Family members, Charlie had learned, could grab a night's sleep while keeping an end-of-life vigil.

Susan locked her father's wheels and guided him into one of the wingbacks that offered back support. His tall frame and very long arms fit the chair perfectly while enabling him to reach whatever Susan would give him. He sighed contentedly. "You can't imagine how stiff I get, being either in bed or in a wheelchair. This is delightful."

Susan opened her bulging satchel from which she extracted a pile of paper. She placed them, face down, in two piles and positioned herself near the corner of the loveseat. She began her presentation. "This should explain a lot about Jonathan and his mother. I've put the articles in chronological order, the earliest on top."

She handed him the first story and kept quiet while he read it. Dated the previous year, it simply reported the death of a local woman and the relevant circumstances. Responding to a nine-one-one call from local long-time resident Robert Murdock, the EMTs and police found Murdock's wife, Clara Murdock, age seventy-nine, unresponsive on their dining room floor. The room had been equipped as an in-home hospital room. Efforts to revive her were unsuccessful. The medical examiner, summoned to the house, pronounced her at 3:45 p.m.

According to a follow-up article, an innocuous postscript, Murdock was quoted as saying he found his wife on the floor. He assumed she had tried to get out of bed and had fallen, perhaps striking her head. Frail and bedridden for over a year, she should not have tried to get up unassisted. There had been no indication that she might try. When he shook her shoulder gently and kept calling her name, he was unable to get her attention. He tried unsuccessfully to get a pulse. She did not seem to be breathing, so he tried CPR. Getting nowhere with that, he called nine-one-one. He would have called minutes sooner, but he was afraid to stop trying CPR. While waiting for them to arrive, which took only a few minutes, he tried mouth to mouth, giving up only when the EMTs replaced him. They quickly realized she had expired.

“So,” Charlie summarized. “The wife was an invalid being cared for at home by an elderly husband. That’s sad. And strange that he agreed to be interviewed, like he needed to defend himself.” He reread the article, contemplating it for a moment. He shrugged. “Must have been a slow press day—nothing blowing up or burning down.”

Susan handed him the third article. “It’s a standard obituary, but it identifies Jonathan.” Charlie read the particulars, which contained the usual stuff. Her last address; whose daughter she had been, now deceased; her education, blue-collar jobs, volunteer and church work. He paused when he reached the survivors’ names. “Here we go. ‘...predeceased by a son in a motorcycle accident, survived by a daughter, Jade (Murdock) Kepley, and grandson Jonathan Kepley...’” He looked up. “That’s our little visitor.” Charlie scanned to the last paragraph. “That’s interesting. In spite of Mrs. Murdock’s charitable involvement it says here, that in lieu of flowers, donations can be made to an account at a local bank.”

“A scholarship fund?”

“Unlikely. I’m guessing it’s to help the family pay funeral and final expenses.”

Charlie skimmed the next article that Susan handed to him. It was short and matter-of-fact. Because Clara Murdock had died at home without a medical professional present, the coroner needed to establish the cause and manner of death. The *cause* was broken ribs that had punctured both her heart and her lungs. A contributing factor was a head injury that caused bleeding in her brain. The *manner* of death was *undetermined*.

The fifth article raised Charlie’s eyebrows. “Is this for real? The authorities are investigating the so-called manner of Clara Murdock’s death? Isn’t it obvious that she died accidentally or of natural causes? Is it still okay to say *old age*?”

“Evidently not. Sounds like they’re thinking it was suspicious. Read on.”

The next article contained specifics from the autopsy that must have raised a red flag: numerous older, healed fractures; malnutrition and trace amounts of panduronium in her system.

The latter could have been related to recent surgery—if she'd had any, which she had not.

“Here's where things take a dramatic turn.” She handed her father the next article.

The thirty-six-point headline screamed: *HUSBAND QUESTIONED IN ELDERLY WIFE'S DEATH*. What followed was an account of what detectives referenced as suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of Clara Murdock, seventy-nine. Previously published accounts repeated Robert Murdock's explanation of what had happened. He sounded like a frantic husband with no medical training trying desperately to revive his unresponsive invalid wife.

The investigation was prompted by discrepancies found at the scene and in the coroner's report. A search warrant was obtained and served for the Murdock residence. A CSI team processed the house. No details of findings, if any, were made available.

Robert Murdock was quoted as saying that maybe his attempts at CPR were too vigorous. After all, she did have osteoporosis and had been bedridden since a stroke the previous year. He didn't know how she managed to get out of bed, although her paralysis was only on one side and, in his words, “she still had all her marbles.” She could talk and seemed to understand. And she had never tried to get out of bed and into her wheelchair unattended. Lately, she had been confined to her bed.

According to the article, Murdock became agitated when questioned about the head injury. Other drugs found in her system were prescription, and everyone who cared for her took great care with the dosage.

To avoid confusion or duplication, a written chart had been kept and initialed by every person who administered her meds. Nurses paid by Robert Murdock handled the oxygen tanks and the administration of any IV drugs as needed. If she had anything inappropriate in her blood, he couldn't explain it.

Ultimately, he demanded that the detectives leave his house. They had returned later with the search warrant. However, Clara Murdock's bedroom had been stripped, the hospital

bed and all her medical equipment removed. A professional team that specialized in infectious disease control had sanitized the room.

“What’s next? Surely they couldn’t believe—” Charlie gasped. “Oh my god. This, I did not expect.”

Chapter 5

The bold headline summed up the story: Quickly Charlie scanned the details.

MAN CHARGED IN WIFE'S DEATH.

Police today arrested Robert Murdock, seventy-five, in connection with the death of his wife, Clara Murdock, seventy-nine. He has been charged with first-degree murder. Papers filed by the district attorney's office contend that Robert Murdock struck his wife repeatedly then crushed her chest as she lay on the floor.

The article ticked off an assortment of secondary charges. Details of the coroner's report included what should have been a fatal level of Panduronium, the inference being that, had the head and chest injury not been fatal, the drug would have killed her. The implication was that the husband became impatient or did not trust the drug to do the job for him. Perhaps she fought back. The motive was attributed to the financial drain and constant demand of caring for an elderly, dependent invalid. The hasty removal of medical equipment, specifics not included, was noted as relevant.

A quote from the district attorney followed. "Old, frail, ill people should be safe in their own homes. If Robert Murdock was at the end of his rope, resources were available to him, from the Agency on Aging to myriad country and state ser-

vices. We intend to prosecute Clara Murdock's murder vigorously. In death, she deserves the dignity and justice she did not receive in life. This prosecution is a message that, in this county, we will not tolerate the abuse of our weakest citizens."

Robert Murdock's "legendary" temper was illustrated with a previously reported altercation at Clara Murdock's nursing home. A neighbor, who spoke on condition of anonymity, described him as "combustible—a man known for his outrageous temper, shouting, and neglecting his reclusive wife."

Charlie snorted. "Everyone wants to be the bride at the wedding or the corpse at the funeral. The media should insist on revealing their names. That would prevent vicious gossip and force 'em to be honest. Susan, what's this about a previous altercation?"

"I did find articles that predates those about Clara Murdock's death. Seems the man has quite a temper. Here you go."

Charlie read the articles, which Susan had kept separate from those about Clara's death. The police had been summoned to a nursing home where Clara was being rehabbed after a stroke. According to the administrator, Murdock became offensive over, in Murdock's words, "mistreatment of his wife." The incident escalated into a shouting match. When Murdock threw a punch that bloodied and broke the administrator's nose, the police were called.

A follow-up article cleared the nursing home of any wrongdoing. Seemed Murdock had expected a nurse to stay with his wife twenty-four/seven, although unwilling or unable to pay for private duty nursing. In exchange for not filing assault charges, Murdock agreed to take his wife elsewhere. Finding other facilities suddenly *filled to capacity* or *with waiting lists* and Clara not qualifying for the county home, Murdock took his wife home. There he cared for her with the help of his daughter and nursing aides.

"So—Clara Murdock was a patient in an economical, but well-run nursing home until the husband mixed it up with the staff and ended up being cared for at home. That's tragic."

"Stay tuned," Susan said. "Read on."

“That explains how someone in her state of health was at home with only an elderly husband to care for her twenty-four/seven. I was still in my forties when your mother first became ill. But I was strong as an ox and quite capable of lifting a ninety-pound woman. But today? I couldn’t do it now. How old did they say he was?”

Susan glanced through other clippings. “Says here he was seventy-five, which made him three or four years younger. Even so—”

“What else do you have there?”

Susan tidied her stack that she’d arranged beside her and kept in order after Charlie had read them. The rest remained face up on her lap.

“They released him?” he asked incredulously, staring at a headline that read, *Indicted Murderer Suspect Foils Bail Hearing*.

“Not what you’d think. A famous Philadelphia lawyer, who specializes in age-related abuse, appeared to represent Robert Murdock, replacing the public defender. According to this article, he contends that because of his age and local roots, and with no living relatives out of state, he wasn’t a flight risk. Also, he was running out of money. The attorney demanded that his client be released ROR—on his own recognizance. More interesting, however, was his diatribe that the whole case was about the district attorney’s upcoming election and his need for a ‘sexy issue.’ The lawyer’s most compelling sound bite was his frequent reference ‘old Mr. Murdock and his own fragile health.’ Meaning he couldn’t possibly have lifted his wife—whom he said was a large woman—out of bed and caused that level of injury.”

The article continued. According to the clever journalist’s wording, before the judge could stop rolling his eyes, Robert Murdock crashed to the floor, an apparent heart-attack victim. Paramedics rushed in, paddles were used to restart his heart, and the victim was carted away in an ambulance to the local hospital’s emergency room.

Charlie sucked in a breath then read and reread the article in detail. He shook his head. "That hearing must have been a circus. Do you suppose there's a shred of truth in any of this?"

"I'm glad I won't have to sit on that jury. It screams lack of probable cause. Everything can be explained logically. Except for that drug they found in her system that didn't belong there."

Charlie contemplated the entire situation in silence for several minutes then raised a finger to punctuate a thought. "Let's consider the larger picture as it relates to Jonathan. Put yourself in the daughter's place. What did you say her name was?"

Susan riffled to the obituary. "Jade. Jade Kepley. That must be her married name."

"Yeah, her. If she didn't have any doubts that her mother died as her father described, she must be outraged and mad at the world. And poor little Jonathan. Jade must be so brittle that any little thing could set her off. Maybe that's why she lashed out at you and it also explains her absentmindedness about Jonathan's whereabouts. You gave her an excuse to vent, although she probably felt justified at the time."

"Dad, even if the grandfather is guilty as sin, that shouldn't wreck Jonathan's life. No wonder he's traumatized. How could he possibly miss being a witness to at least part of this drama, even if he doesn't understand what's at stake? If you're hoping to help, aren't you afraid of making things worse? You're not a child psychologist."

Charlie, ignoring her comment, pointed to the papers that remained on Susan's lap. "What else do you have there?"

Susan picked up the remaining clippings and handed them to her father. Charlie identified them as letters to the editor. While one decried the unfairness of trying a case in the press and another expounded on the crushing demands put on family caregivers, several others shrieked around one central theme: What goes around, comes around.

"I guess that explains what Robert Murdock is doing here at in the VA's Hospice ward."

"Someone here, who doesn't want to be quoted, did tell me that he's a heart patient. I guess he isn't expected to live more

than six months, much less stand trial. The DA would be stupid to wheel him into a courtroom on a gurney, oxygen mask over his face with a monitor beep-beep-beeping. How fast would you vote that DA out of office?”

Charlie squirmed, arched his back, then ran his hands up and down his spine.

“Dad, let’s get you back to your room. Hunching over this stuff must be a strain. How about a little nap?”

“I am a bit weary. But Susan? Let’s keep these articles out of sight. They’re ballistic about privacy issues around here. If everyone doesn’t already know the Murdock family tragedy, I don’t want them to learn it from us.” He frowned, head down, not looking at anything in particular. “If I could find out what really happened—you don’t suppose the child knows...”



Susan nibbled a guest meal while her father attacked his lunch in the large, cheery dayroom. She marveled at the variety and number of small portions that made up his meal. Not a great fan of her own cooking, she found her sandwich more than adequate. Her dad, she noticed from the checks on the menu slip that accompanied his tray, had ordered nearly every available item. Finishing every scrap, he declared it “most satisfactory.”

Interesting—in a setting like this—how mealtime becomes the highlight of the day.

Finally, he pulled off his clothing protector, an overgrown terrycloth bib, that the staff had velcroed behind his neck. “Better to just let them do it,” he chuckled. “Some of these guys don’t have great muscle control and appreciate not having to wear their lunch all afternoon. It’s kind of a joke. Everyone says they don’t need a bib, but they go along so that others don’t feel conspicuous. Trying to spoon soup over big bellies with shaky hands is hard. And some have trouble finding their mouths.”

Susan had not failed to notice that at each of the other three card tables a staff member was either helping a patient eat, was

chatting with him, or simply holding their hand. Most patients, however, ate or were fed in their rooms. “Dad, is being here depressing?”

“Not really, hon. It’s a beautiful place. Every staff member wants to work here—could probably make more money elsewhere. It’s a religious commitment for many of them. And, if you listen, nobody’s shrieking in pain, but they aren’t drugged senseless either. They find the balance. It’s real quality care. And the appreciation for the veterans’ contribution to our freedom is everywhere.

“There’s two young guys in private rooms down the hall—can’t be forty years old—both with terminal cancer. One of them can operate a motorized wheel chair, and the other inches around with a walker. They get together and spend hours playing a computerized medieval resource management game. One guy brought his own laptop, and someone from Information Technology scrounged another, and hooked them both to the Internet. They keep in touch with family and friends all over the country. Watch TV together. Escorts take them for wheelchair walks around the campus.

“If a patient is actively dying, a nurse holds his hand, strokes his forehead, reads to him, whatever the patient finds comforting. Really, it’s humbling to watch them help families cope. So, depressing? It’s inspiring. Everyone who works here is committed. Being rich is not just about money.”

“Dad—you look so much better. You’re obviously not in immediate danger. If they want to discharge you, have you considered where you’d like to live?”

“You mean, a nursing home? Assisted living? Before I do that, I think I’d try for the floor above us. That’s Skilled Nursing. But if I don’t need that level of care...” He thought a minute. “Perhaps, something temporary. A step down in between the hospital and going home.

“Jeannette and I have been talking—”

“Oh boy. Here it comes. And the answer is ‘no.’”

“Hear me out, Dad. Both in Atlanta and in San Diego, we have plenty of room. Jeannette and her husband purposely built the house with a grandparent suite on the first floor, and there’s

just Doug and me in California. That is, until you can be on your own. Unless you'd rather stay permanently." She perked up intentionally. "You could come and go as you please."

"Sweetie, that's awfully kind of you both. But I cannot, I will not, live on the fringe of my daughters' lives. I want to go home, even if it means having professional help." He reached across the small round table and covered Susan's small hand with his own. "You and Jeannette must get your minds around my reality. In all probability, some day that other aneurysm is going to blow, and that will be it. Next time, there won't be months languishing in a hospital, steady recovery, and a victorious roll out the door. It might be tomorrow. It might be next year. Or maybe in ten. I have no regrets, other than wanting to dance at my grandchildren's weddings. And who knows—I may do that yet. You do understand. Oh, come on. I didn't mean to make you cry. We just need to deal with reality. 'If you're going to steer your little boat through the rapids, you have to look for the rocks.'"

"Who said that?"

"I did. Now, if we're finished with lunch, let's go back to my room. I'm tired enough to need a rest, and you need a break. Go shopping. Enjoy this great weather. Go spy on my neighbors."

Susan laughed. "Okay, Dad. But we're not finished with this discussion."

"Are too."



Charlie had never been one for napping. He could sleep for all eternity, so why waste time now? In the here-and-now, he did not want to miss anything. Even speed naps weren't his bag. He would need an hour to fall asleep and two more to fully awake up. The morning's visit, however, had left him exhausted. Maybe he'd just stretch out—close his eyes and relax. Just for a few minutes—

"Need anything else?" Mike had delivered and collected Charlie from his bathroom. In addition to addressing his other

needs, Charlie had insisted on brushing his teeth. His mother, God love her soul, had been determined that her children would have good teeth. Nothing was eaten in their pre-fluoride household without her intonation, “go brush your teeth.” Candy was permitted at Halloween and Easter, but even then in minuscule amounts. He would die with his own teeth, and later than sooner. A crown here, a root canal there, a dozen unavoidable fillings, none of which he counted. He was on track.

He grinned at himself in the mirror, feeling more like himself every day. The in-house barber had done justice to his thick, straight, white hair. Men were jealous. Women called him cute. Cute! Huh! That was for babies and little girls.

“Just help me onto the bed. I need to rest my legs. Gotta stay sharp to keep up with my kid. She and her sister are cooking up plans for my future. I may be in for a fight.”

Mike smiled as he maneuvered Charlie’s legs closer to the center of the bed and flipped the end of the quilt onto his legs. He grasped that unless Charlie was in between sheets, this didn’t really count as being in bed. That was for sick people and little kids, he had said. This was more like being in a lounge chair.

“Say, Charlie. If a single room becomes available, would you be interested? Several of them have leather recliners. In the past, patients’ families have brought them in and, when the patient passed away shortly thereafter, offered to leave them. The VA bought others. You might be more comfortable there.”

Charlie glanced in Bill Kelly’s direction. “No, I enjoy having company. And, if Bill needs something and can’t manage the call button, perhaps I can help. Thanks anyway.” Mike flipped him a wave and hurried out to attend other patients.

Charlie had no sooner closed his eyes than approaching sleep spread its warmth. He felt as if he had completed a strenuous double shift or a Saturday spading Emma’s garden. A familiar hum rose in his ears, drowning all the ward’s other sounds. He slept.

By the time something nudged him awake, lengthening shadows had spilled onto his quilt. He opened his eyes. Jonathan stood at the foot of the bed. Charlie grinned broadly and

beckoned the child to come closer as he fiddled with the buttons to elevate his bed. "I'm so glad to see you. You make every day happier."

Jonathan glanced tentatively toward Bill Kelly. "Mr. Kelly? You're worried about Mr. Kelly? He's just taking a nap. He's really, really good at that."

Jonathan smiled shyly.

"I'm awake," Bill Kelly's weak voice belied his bright eyes and big smile.

"Jonathan, Mr. Kelly has something to explain to you—about his oxygen equipment. I mean, that plastic thing he wears in his nose that's attached to the tube. He can't talk very loud. Why don't you go over by his bed? Make it easy for him."

At first, Jonathan remained rooted to the spot, occasionally moving his glance from one man to the other. "When you get back, I'll have something for you." Jonathan brightened. As if struggling with imaginary demons, he edged within a yard of Bill Kelly's bedrail.

"The last time you were here, I did something that I believe frightened you. Or maybe you were just worried," Bill said. He paused a moment to catch his breath. "Now don't worry, I won't pull it out again."

Jonathan looked skeptical, scrunching his eyebrows, but said nothing.

Bill paused for a minute. "Wait. Hard to talk and breathe sometimes." Jonathan remained by his side. Bill's chest rose and fell rapidly at first, then slowed. Several moments passed. "That's better. Now, they can't stick the end of the tube up my nose. Right? That would be silly and it wouldn't work. So they attach the tube to this little nosepiece. I don't need a lot of extra oxygen—just a little. If you could feel what comes out, you'd think it was air. Sometimes I take out the nosepiece because my nose gets itchy. Or it runs. I put the nosepiece back after I've rubbed my nose or blown it. Now—if I take it out, for just a minute, you won't be frightened, okay?"

Jonathan scowled. Bill continued. "The nosepiece is held in place by these tiny plastic pieces that hook around my ears." He unhooked the one closest to Jonathan. "That's okay. I don't

have to take it off if that scares you. I just wanted to show you that it's safe. okay?"

Jonathan nodded slightly.

Kelly slipped the nosepiece out and held it a few inches from his face. "I can't let you touch it because it's germey, but if you hold your finger, just a little bit away from the holes, maybe you can feel it."

Jonathan's little face convulsed in fear as he shook his face in alarm.

"Okay." Kelly put the nosepiece back in position. "Maybe some other time. I just wanted to show you."

Charlie had unearthed a Hershey's Kiss from his bedside table. Perched on the edge of his bed, feet dangling, he was prepared to present it to his brave little friend. Jonathan, however, turned abruptly and dashed out of the room.

"Thanks, Bill. That was great. Even I understood."

"That kid is terrified of something."

"And I'm going to make it my mission to find out what that is."



Charlie anticipated physical therapy with pleasure. He knew it was helping. One day in bed, they kept reinforcing, meant three days of hard work to regain what he had lost. At first, in his bed, the only weights he had lifted were his own arms. Up and down. Up and down. They felt like twenty-five pound weights. Then, seated on the side of his bed, the therapist flexed his legs at the knee. Up down, up down.

When he graduated to the small weight room, he hefted one-pound hand weights while seated in an armless chair. That was increased to two-pounders. Similar weights were strapped to his ankles. More up and more down. Slowly, he graduated to greater resistance. The weights were racked on a wooden pyramid, from lightest on top, with numbers etched on their ends. Each increment was painted a different color. Charlie compared his progress to ascending a rainbow, the pot of gold—the prize—being his independence. He thrust aside images of that

hidden demon lurking somewhere in his chest, poised to rupture if he twisted too far. Hefted too much. Dared to dream.

Once his muscles got comfortable and the routine got easy or boring, he progressed to the machines. From wheelchair to walker to the black vinyl seat, Charlie mastered the motions under the watchful eye and skilled hands of the therapist. Charlie felt safe wearing his wide leather belt that supported his abdominal muscles.

As days became weeks, he made progress on the machines. Upper back, shoulders, biceps and triceps, seated leg curl, leg extension, leg press—he learned to adjust the resistance and number of repetitions by pressing yellow buttons at the end of black bars. No need to pick up heavy plates, as in his previous gym. This equipment was ideally suited for recovering patients.

While there, he made friends with residents from other wards, particularly Skilled Nursing. The goal of one army veteran, an MS patient, was just to maintain his upper body strength as long as possible. Charlie was awed by his jolly attitude, his refusal to complain or rail about his fate. Instead, he kept everyone enthralled, recounting his misadventures as an air traffic controller. While the veterans waited their turns on the machines, they discussed CNN's morning news, swapped war stories, argued politics, bragged about grandkids, and expounded upon their spiritual journeys.

Room numbers were exchanged as were the times and places of the next Bingo marathon, a special bus outing, or a favorite gospel group that had scheduled a concert. How seductive it might have been for Charlie to slip into this easy comradery without forcing himself through the rigors of recovery. These friends were entrenched for the duration, but he dare not give up or give in.

Charlie was brought back to the moment when Zeke, his escort, arrived at his door. "You ready to rock 'n' roll?"

Charlie grimaced, wondering how many more times he could bear to hear that expression.

"Oh, come on! It's not that bad. You know that you love being worked to death. Oops. Bad choice of words." Zeke snickered, enjoying the expression. Even Hospice had its own

private jokes, as long as Staff didn't hear. "Are you ready? I am way early. Could come back in thirty minutes, or you could hang with the guys down at PT."

An idea formed. "Do I have time to stop at a room down the hall? I can meet you at the elevator in half an hour."

"That's cool. I'll let the desk know the plan. They get cranky if we get too creative with the schedule. We'd both be in big trouble if we went AWOL."

As soon as Zeke disappeared around the corner, Charlie wheeled himself into the hall. He envied the fellows who could tootle around in those motorized chairs, but his request *was* denied as counterproductive. His arms needed exercise, and his legs were not helpless. He glided then stopped to peer into Robert Murdock's private room. It was deep and narrow, the head of his bed abutting the exterior wall. To the bed's left, a tall window probably overlooked the parklike expanse of manicured grounds. The mini-blinds, however, were closed, obscuring what should be a magnificent view of the rolling countryside. The gloom produced by one forty-watt bulb was depressing.

Charlie rolled toward the doorway, halting beside the propped-open door. He had intended to knock. Instead, he said "Knock, knock" softly. If Mr. Murdock were sleeping, Charlie didn't want to disturb him. The man's eyes were open, however.

"Hi. I'm Charlie from down the hall. We haven't met yet. Just thought I'd drop in and say hello."

When the man smiled weakly, Charlie felt braver.

"May I come in? I don't want to disturb you if you're resting."

"Sure." All but a whisper.

Charlie started the familiar dialog that prefaced all conversation when vet met vet at the VA. "So. What branch of the military were you in?"

"Army. Korea."

"Really? Nam here." Charlie did the math. If Murdock was seventy-five years old, he must have been one of the last to serve there. Perhaps an advisor. Or maybe he was a career

man—a lifer as they were called—and served multiple tours. They could swap stories some other time. Charlie was on a mission.

“Say. Didn’t I see a cute little kid come into this room? My roommates and I have been trying to figure out who he is. Can’t tell you how much a child brightens things up around here. My two grandchildren live in Atlanta and I don’t get to see them very often. You know, parents have jobs, kids have school, and airfare’s expensive. We borrow our friends’ grandchildren whenever we can.”

The man smiled. Charlie couldn’t help but compare Murdock’s condition to that of Bill Kelly. The latter was in much better shape while being two decades older. If Charlie and Bill Kelly were both lucky, they’d be around for the real Christmas. *Funny how quickly you get attached.* He refocused his attention.

Murdock nodded. “He’s my grandson. Comes in every day with my daughter.” He paused to catch his breath then continued. “She’s real protective. Won’t leave him with neighbors or strangers. Says they’re real mean. Doesn’t trust them. Can’t say that I blame her. So many neglect their own kids...” He faded off, turning his face toward the wall.

“How old is your grandson?”

The old man turned his head, brightening. “Five.” Then the light faded. “I missed his birthday, being sick.” A pause. “And all.” A slight turn of his face, a tear glistening on his cheek. He didn’t say more.

“This seems like a great place for a child to visit, the way the staff welcomes families and guests. I’ve overheard how everyone loves your grandson. They all say he’s so well behaved. Your daughter’s doing a great job.”

Murdock refocused on Charlie, a wide smile brightening his translucent face.

Charlie forged ahead. “Something I’ve been wondering. When I was a child, unfamiliar places and strangers scared me. How does your grandson react to such things? Does being here make him uneasy? Is he afraid of something?”

Charlie nearly leapt from his chair when an angry voice boomed from behind him. "What the hell are you doing in here? Who gave you permission to barge into this room and bother my father? Didn't you read the signs on the door? Get out! Now!"

Charlie's heart doubled its rate, adrenaline plunging him into flight mode. Immediately, he grasped the wheels of his chairs, but in trying to flee, he crashed into the woman who was now making disparaging curses about his parentage. "I'm sorry. So sorry. I didn't mean any harm—"

The woman jumped out of his way. "Just get out! Leave my family alone."

"Yes'm." Heart pounding, head focused on the tile floor that preceded him, Charlie rolled down the hall. He half expected angry personnel to pop from various doors to read him the riot act since the irate woman's words must have traveled all over the ward. A sign on the door? He'd missed that entirely. But as he approached the nurses' station, none of the nurses paid any attention to him. No one even looked up. Charlie glanced at the wall clock. His escort, Zeke, was not scheduled to meet him for another twenty minutes. He cleared his throat.

The man at the desk covered the phone's mouthpiece and whispered, "You looking for Zeke? He said to tell you he'd be in the kitchenette. Probably grabbing a cup of our *black death*." He winked conspiratorially.

Charlie located Zeke without difficulty. "Take your time with that coffee. My mission failed miserably."



Even a great workout spiced with the companionship failed to elevate Charlie's low spirits. He could not shake it off. All he had been trying to do, he kept telling himself, was to learn something, anything that might shed some light on Jonathan's problems. The child was more than sad or depressed. Something awful had penetrated his spirit. Charlie didn't need to be a shrink to know that. So why wasn't anyone tending to Jonathan's needs? Had he been evaluated? Was he seeing a thera-

pist? If not, what was the grace period beyond which he'd fall through the cracks from which he could not be extricated? And now Charlie had made an enemy of the mother.

Declining an offer to join his buddies to watch a vintage movie in the auditorium, he asked Zeke to take him back to his room. That morning, Mike had lowered his bed to rump level, enabling him to get himself in and out unassisted. Such progress should have made him euphoric. But it didn't. Zeke, the eternal mother hen, insisted on supporting his arm as Charlie completed the maneuver. And he endured one more of Zeke's lectures on the importance of properly setting the wheel brakes.

"You okay?" Zeke concluded.

"Sure. I'm fine. Just a little tired from my workout." Given the number of times he'd been asked that same question, Charlie chided himself to either snap out of it or punch up his act. The last thing he wanted was for the medical folks to insist on this pill or that. He knew what was weighing him down and just wanted some privacy.

"How was PT?" Bill Kelly inquired. His eyes were closed, but he had missed nothing.

Charlie made a decision. "Bill, can I trust you?"

"Absolutely. What's up? Is it our little friend?"

"I got caught snooping." Bill laughed merrily, which made Charlie smile. Then he gave Bill the executive summary of what he had learned from the newspapers.

When he finished, Bill sighed. "I sort of remember something like that. Last fall, right? It was on the news just before I got sick this last time. I was short of breath. A friend drove me to the ER. Hectic night—big traffic pileup. Lots of victims. I ended up watching the news while I waited. As I recall, a man was arrested, supposedly for killing his wife. I remember thinking that was unusual, given his age. An old guy like him would be more likely to smother her with a pillow."

"The husband is Jonathan's grandfather. He's right down the hall."

"Explains a lot."

"I tried to talk to the grandfather. I was attempting to find out what's eating Jonathan when his mother caught me. What a

tiger! She was livid. Ordered me out. That's twice now for my family. If that mother puts Susan and me together—I just hope she doesn't take it out on the child. Or complain to our administrator. I doubt we'll be seeing that little guy any time soon. I was just trying to help. Sometimes that's worse than doing nothing."

Bill smiled. "That kind of heart problem never killed anyone." He sighed, slipping his covers up to his chin and nesting himself in his favorite position facing the wall. Charlie knew what that meant—enough talk and exertion. He needed to nap.

Perhaps he was too tired as well. He'd overdone it, depression being the penalty phase. Charlie plumped his pillow and adjusted his quilt, his eyes falling on the beautifully embroidered inscription. *Thank you for defending our country and our freedom.* That, more than any ugly words, brought tears to his eyes. What would Emma have done? She never, ever took anything the wrong way. She was incapable of seeing flaws in others, which had only made him more protective. She projected emotional safety, and people instinctively knew she would keep their secrets and not be judgmental.

In middle age, she was an expansion of the teenager who had befriended him. Everyone wanted to be her best friend. And she had chosen him. Sometimes he thought, in spite of his girls, he'd never adjust. That he was stuck in a bottomless void. Fifteen years had gone by in a blink. His memories were crystal as if she'd been here just yesterday. He turned to the wall and buried his face in his pillow, a tear narrowly missed his ear. *Stop it! Be a man!*

Susan had brought in his favorite picture, not a professional portrait, but a framed candid. A magnificent coral sunset that was sinking into the ocean, back dropping Emma, Susan, and Jeannette who were attempting to launch a brilliant purple kite. A brisk wind jumbled their hair and clothes, sticking Emma's voile coverup against her slim body. That fall came the first diagnosis, supposedly caught in plenty of time. Strange how his life was divided in two—what came before, and what came after. He never said it out loud, but he reckoned time in that way.

What year did that happen? Let's see. That was X many years after that day in September. That would make it 19xx or 20xx.

How Jonathan had crept to his side undetected, Charlie couldn't explain. The child's approach had hit neither Charlie's radar nor his excellent foxlike ears. He felt the small hand on his arm and turned bloodshot eyes to meet his. Jonathan face was a mere foot from his, blue eyes filled with compassion. Charlie hastily wiped his face on his sleeve.

"Why are you sad?" the child whispered.

Slowly Charlie extended his hand and gently stroked the boy's silky head. "My wife died a long time ago. Now she's in heaven with God and Jesus, just like Mr. D and your grandma. But I still miss her, sometimes so much that I simply can't stand it. It makes me so sad. I was just thinking about her and wishing she were here. How she would have loved to meet you."

Jonathan rested his cheek on Charlie's chest, his head facing the foot of the bed. The child's warmth penetrated Charlie's shirt, his hair smelling of baby shampoo. Their first conversation—the moment was magical. A slender thread was knitting their bond. The child spoke, his little voice barely audible. "I miss Gram, too."

Charlie stroked the little guy's head, barely touching its silky strands.

Then Jonathan uttered a few shocking words. Charlie was sure he'd misunderstood, but something in the child's trembling confession told him otherwise. Charlie was terrified of breaking the spell by asking him to repeat what he'd said, but he could not resist.

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ARe, BlackOpalBooks.com, and other fine bookstores

About the Author



Nancy Hughes's family says of her work: "She murders people." On paper, that is. She made the leap from journalist, media, community relations and PR specialist to follow her heart and write mystery novels. She credits her love of writing to her parents, who were voracious readers. When Hughes was small, they spent hours reading to her, which fueled her lively imagination. Transplanted from Key West at age two, she never adjusted to the cold. While walking to grade school, then Penn State classes, she invented mystery stories to distract herself from the snow and ice. Now, nothing stirs the creative juices like a hot shower.

The view from her rural Pennsylvania home-office window is just as distracting as big city chaos when the deer munch her beloved azaleas. A three-hour commute to Manhattan connects Hughes to the Mystery Writers of America's New York chapter meetings. Their devoted leaders provide timely updates, inspiration, mentor programs, workshops, seminars, tours, legal tips, and boundless moral support. And friends! With whom she exchanges war stories and encouragement. Being published by Black Opal Books and working with their professionals is a prodigious opportunity. Her first BOB mystery is *The Dying Hour*, and a second mystery novel, *A Matter of Trust*, will follow.