

MISTRAL
BY
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Monday

Although dawn comes early on July mornings in New Hampshire, the sun had barely punched in when I delivered a mug of green tea to Jen—for thinning her cervical mucus—seriously! She was still under the covers, which is where I would have liked to have been, a pillow elevating her hips. Her eyes were closed, a beatific expression spread across her face. I knew it wasn't from the baby dancing we'd done earlier. She was dreaming of the baby we had just conceived; a little girl with adorable little fingers, gossamer hair, and eyes so loving and innocent that you could spy heaven through them.

Her granite-green eyes opened, and she smiled coyly. While she pulled herself into sitting position, I spun the wheelchair with my foot so it faced the bed and handed her the green tea.

She clinked it against my coffee cup. "Let's hope this is the month."

I took a sip of my coffee, holding the mug's warmth with both hands. We had been trying to conceive for ten months without success. Ten months didn't feel that long to me, but it seemed more like ten years to Jen, who was approaching thirty-five and wanted at least a couple of kids. To add to those pressures, like a lot of paraplegics, Jen was fiercely determined to prove how normal she was. And pregnancy would be one large, irrefutable manifestation of normalcy.

"I'm beyond hoping," I joked. "I'm begging."

By then I should have learned not to kid around about conception, but I had already been doing stud service for the previous two days, based on Jen's meticulously maintained basal body temperature chart or BBT for short. But when Jen's urine turned the ovulation predictor paper blue, as it had that night before, we went into high gear. "It's blue" was neither a bit of news nor a phrase of affection. It was a command. There was no tarrying, no waiting for the

mood to strike. “It’s blue” meant only one thing: it was time...time to get it up, get it in, and get her pregnant.

“You want a baby, too, remember.”

“I don’t think our chances are increased by having sex before dawn.”

“I thought it would be easier while Brittany was still asleep.”

My nine-year-old niece had been staying with us since Saturday, when her mother and father had left for a three-week trip to Italy to celebrate their fifteenth wedding anniversary. She was sleeping in the guestroom across the hall. To help with Brittany’s adjustment, we left both doors open and the nightlight on in the hall.

I wanted to say that we could have waited until that night, but diplomatically just nodded instead. Jen insisted on good “coverage,” — six days of a baby-dancing-fest (“BDF”), as her TTC (trying-to-conceive) internet community called it—even though her fertility books said every twenty-four to forty-eight hours was adequate.

Her bedside table was a small shrine to the gods of fertility. Books, magazines, and pamphlets fought for space with pill bottles, a fertility candle (originally a joke gift from one of my sisters, now no longer so funny), a bottle of Robitussin (again to decrease the viscosity of the cervical mucus—truly!), and a new addition, a small bottle of olive oil—organic, cold-pressed, and, of course, extra virgin.

I made fun of these accessories as unnatural— “if God wants you pregnant, He’ll do it on His schedule” —and unnecessary— “I’m Italian from a big family.” Still a bottle of multivitamins with extra zinc and vitamin C sat on my bedside table. And yes, I took one of each every morning.

Jen finished her tea and waved me out of her wheelchair. “Okay, honey, we need to get moving.”

Grabbing her legs, she swung them over the edge of the bed where they hung limply. She put on her bathrobe and vaulted into her wheelchair with a grace and agility that still amazed me. Even crippled, she was still as beautiful as the prancing UNH cheerleader I had adored at a distance seventeen years earlier.

Playfully, she slapped my rump like I was some horse. “You truly are an Italian stallion.” She giggled musically.

* * *

Around seven, while Jen prepared Brittany’s breakfast, I went to get her up. It was good that I was the one to wake her and not Jen, for Brittany was sleeping like an angel, cuddling her stuffed brown horse, her black hair framing her face. That picture of a sleeping child, as beautiful and innocent as the Madonna, would have only whipped Jen’s desire to conceive into a frenzy.

Brittany woke easily and a few minutes later was washed and dressed in her riding habit: paddock boots, jeans, and a tee shirt with a silk-screen of horseback rider under a setting sun. Sitting on her Aunt Jenny’s lap, Brittany was explaining something about dressage, demonstrating with her stuffed horse. Her breakfast was untouched.

“Come on, Brittany, I have to get to court.”

While their parents were away, Brittany’s two younger brothers were staying with neighborhood friends in Dover. But, because Bartholow Farms, where Brittany spent the summer mucking out stalls, grooming horses, and getting some dressage training, was not far off my commute, she was staying with us for three weeks. The plan was for me to drop her off and Jen to pick her up at four. Today was the first day.

“Okay, Uncle Tony,” she answered cheerfully, leaning forward to eat a spoonful of Lucky Charms. “Wait till you see Mistral. He’s the most beautiful stallion in the world.”

“Can’t wait.”

Mistral was probably the most famous four-legged resident of the seacoast. Even I who knew nothing about horses had heard of him. A few years earlier he had won the Preakness and a bunch of other races, but what really set him apart, as I understood it, was his perfect racehorse physique. Apparently he was one of the most sought after and expensive breeding stallions in the world.

Brittany jammed her lunch and stuffed horse into a knapsack that was already full to overflowing and nearly as large as she. In the backseat of my Saturn she rummaged through her pack. “Uncle Tony, I forgot something.”

I groaned quietly, but she was already out of the car and dashing back into the house. She returned with a pair of Walkman headphones, which she immediately slapped on.

* * *

My bailiff, Lionel LaCasse, was waiting for me to pick him up, as I had done almost every morning since beginning as a judge three years earlier. He was in his usual spot, the sunny kitchen alcove of Widow Buehler, his downstairs neighbor and landlady, who doted on him. LL took a few final sips of coffee from a teacup far too delicate for his big hands. When he was finished, he waved acknowledgement and handed the cup to Widow Buehler.

For years LL had been head of the Major Crimes Unit of the New Hampshire State Police. Many considered him to be the state’s best cop at the time, in some eyes his skills were legendary. So were his less savory exploits. After his retirement—I had heard rumors that he was forced out for one too many peccadilloes—LL became a bailiff. It was at about the same

time I was appointed a judge, and we were thrown together. Despite are difference in ages, I was thirty-eight and LL was fifty-two, we became best friends.

LL eased his large bulk into the front seat of my compact. Before buckling his seatbelt, he turned to greet Brittany. “Hi.”

Brittany looked up blankly and then removed her earphones.

LL tried again. “Hi, I’m LL. You must be Brittany.”

“Yes,” she answered politely.

“I’m your Uncle Tony’s boss,” he said brightly.

“Oh,” she replied, putting her earphones back on. In a moment, mouthing the music, she disappeared into the impenetrable world of children. LL, facing front, grabbed my copy of the Coastal Courier, roughly unfolding it. After skimming the sports pages and surveying the obituaries, he began harrumphing his way through the front section.

In a few minutes we were wending our way along Shore Road, laid out over three hundred years ago to connect Portsmouth to Rye Harbor. Taking advantage of every inch of shoreline, elegant seaside homes packed both sides of the road. Although designated a scenic highway, the homeowners’ tasteful efforts to keep the views to themselves granted only occasional glimpses of the ocean. Homes well beyond Jen and my means unless I started taking bribes.

Bartholow Farms was hard to miss. The march of homes ended, replaced by untamed tidal marsh on the ocean side and forest on the other. A quarter of a mile later Bartholow Farm’s signature white board fences appeared. Then the farm came into view, an oversized white colonial, commanding the first major rise in elevation about a half mile from the North Atlantic. Nothing, no beach homes, no seaside motels, no condominiums, interfered with its panoramic vista of fields, salt marsh, and the Atlantic.

It was all owned by the scion of one of Portsmouth's oldest and richest families, Edward Ramses Wingate Bartholow or E.R. Wingate Bartholow, but best known as Winny. A fixture at Seacoast charity events, gala dinners, and political fundraisers, he had been and may still be a generous contributor to the Summer Arts Festival. I became a nodding acquaintance by serving on the board while he was chair.

Winny was not someone you could easily miss. Wildly extravagant, impeccably dressed, hair dyed Beach Boy blonde, he was in his mid-fifties, about LL's age. And wherever he went, an entourage of beautiful young horsemen always accompanied him.

He had recently been on the cover of Forbes magazine. The article reported how he had built Bartholow Farms from almost nothing. When his father died, Winny quickly learned that the family was broke and Bartholow Farms was about to be foreclosed on. Galvanized into action, he sold off the mediocre stock and packaged the five remaining Thoroughbreds into Bartholow Farms first syndication. Because of his family's connections with trust companies in Boston and New York, Winny had no trouble selling partnership shares to rich doctors and trust account babies who wanted a taste of the horseracing world. With some masterful breeding, adroit training, and a dash of luck, he had tripled his initial investors' money and found his calling.

"The King of the Sport of Kings" was Forbes' title. With stables in Lexington, Kentucky, Ocala, Florida, and Santa Ynez, California, Bartholow Farms was the largest syndicator, breeder, and trainer of Thoroughbreds in the world. With his solid gold reputation, Winny packaged 25, 50, even a 100 horses at a time into syndicates, peddling them to blue chip trusts, pension funds, and brokerage houses, which in turn distributed them to investors only too happy to own a piece of Bartholow Farms' illustrious Thoroughbreds. "Glamour sells," Winny was quoted as saying, "but profit brings them back." It was Bartholow Farms recent

IPO that had precipitated the Forbes article. Its opening stock price had doubled by the end of the day, and overnight Winny became one of the richest men in New Hampshire.

A long blue stone drive reached down to Shore Road. When the tires began to crunch the stones, Brittany took off her headphones and started reorganizing her backpack. The drive split near the house, with one branch sweeping around the main house to a small village of barns, stables, and riding rings in back.

At the indoor riding ring I got out with Brittany so she could show me around, and also so I could introduce myself and supply phone numbers to whoever was in charge. Uninterested in looking around, LL continued reading my newspaper.

* * *

“Come on, Uncle Tony.” Brittany pulled at my hand, leading me to the stallion barn. “We have to hurry or else we won’t see Mistral being turned out.” She tilted her face upward to catch my eye. “Sometimes they even let me pet him when he goes by.”

As soon as we entered the stallion barn I could tell something wasn’t right. Three-quarters of the way down the central aisle, a crowd had gathered at one of the stalls. I looked over questioningly at Brittany. With her eyes focused straight ahead, she pulled my arm to move me faster.

Although I’d been to Bartholow Farms a few times, I had never been in any of the buildings. The stallion barn was something else. The cushy black rubber carpet covering the corridor was clean enough to eat off. The oversized stalls were constructed of rich dark wood, laid at angles, thick with varnish, and shiny with wax.

Brittany wormed her way through the throng, tugging me behind her. A brass plaque above the stall read “Mistral” and went on to list the races he had won. The stallion, the same

color as the woodwork, lay peacefully on his side. If it hadn't been for the weeping and grieving, I would have thought Mistral was merely napping on the bed of wood shavings. Clinging to my hip, Brittany peered into the stall.

Although the door had been slid all the way back, the stable hands and grooms hung back, reluctant to enter. The only person in the stall was a short grizzled trainer caressing the animal with thick rough hands. Even to my untrained eye Mistral was a marvelous looking animal. His dark chestnutty coat gleamed as if he had just been shampooed. His shoulders and haunches rippled with power, the muscles smooth and sinewy.

“Colic?” a Latino stable hand ventured.

“Colic’s never been a problem with Mistral,” a young female groom replied, wiping the wetness from her eyes.

“Heart attack?” queried a pretty young man with the slim build of an elongated jockey.

An old trainer, kneeling on the cedar shavings and stroking the horse’s neck, shook his head “no.” I couldn’t tell if he was denying it was a heart attack or scolding Fate.

Brittany held my hand, her face pink and blotchy. I recalled my reassurance to my brother Sal about Brittany staying with us and transporting her to Bartholow Farms. “Not a problem,” I said confidently. Well, now there was a problem. The first day I take her to the farm, her favorite horse is dead and—

Brittany tugged on my hand. “Uncle Tony, I want to go home.”

Inwardly I winced. “Sure,” I said, knowing that Jen, who had been trying her hand at freelance writing since the accident ended her career as an emergency room nurse, was working on an article on disabled entrepreneurs and could be any place. Which meant Brittany would be in my chambers at court for most of the day, and quite possibly all of it.

I glanced at my watch. In approximately an hour more than one hundred jurors would be at Rockingham County Superior Court for jury selection. And I was presiding. For me, at that moment, a dead horse was a very small problem.

The old trainer looked up and in a gruff brogue said, “There’s nothin’ more we can do here.” To the Latino he had added, “Juan, be a good lad there and go fetch Michael and the bucket loader. We need to get him out a’ this stable.” Juan jogged off.

To the slender young man the trainer growled, “Where’s Winny?”

“In the office.”

“Well, ring him and find out what he wants to do.”

“Okay,” the young man answered and strode off down the rubber-matted corridor.

The trainer creaked upright. He was a short, stout man with leathery hands and face. “Jaysus, have mercy,” he muttered as he left the stall. To the remaining mourners, he said sharply, “You’ll be doing him no good dawdling and gawkin’. Get to work, the lot a yah.” He rested his hand on Brittany’s head for a second. “Sorry luv.”

I held out my hand and introduced myself. “I’m Tony Paris, Brittany’s uncle.”

“Mac O’Farrell.”

“I don’t think Brittany’s going to stay today.”

“Can’t say I blame her.” He leaned down so his head was closer to Brittany’s. “Who’s your instructor, luv?”

“Mr. Klingman,” she answered softly.

“I’ll tell him for you,” he said and walked away.

We remained, holding hands, staring mutely at the fallen animal until everyone had left. I pulled gently on Brittany’s small hand, and we started walking down the aisle. Dust motes drifted in the long shafts of morning sunlight. The stallions seemed restless, snorting and

stamping impatiently in their stalls. A group of grooms and stable hands collected at the barn door, still discussing Mistral's death. Ahead of us Mac O'Farrell barked, "Get along, get along!"

Suddenly Brittany broke away from me and ran back up the rubber-matted aisle to Mistral's stall. Once I saw her duck inside, I slowed to allow her a few seconds with the horse she so loved. When I got there, she was standing by the horse's head. Big soundless tears rolled down her cheeks. In her hand she held a clump of Mistral's hair pulled from his mane.

"Brittany!" I said, turning to see if anyone else had seen what she'd done. "Put it in your backpack." Unable to undo the wrong, I at least wanted her to conceal the evidence.

She stuffed the horsehair into her knapsack and slung it over her shoulders. Holding hands again, the two of us walked down the central corridor toward the rectangle of daylight at the far end. When we passed one of the stable hands, Brittany looked away so he wouldn't see her tears.

Once in the car, she broke down again.

LL glanced at me. "What's this all about?"

"Her favorite horse, Mistral, died during the night."

"And?"

"She's going to be junior bailiff for the day."

LL closed his eyes and dropped his head, knowing he would be the one in charge of her. We drove the twenty miles to court in silence, interrupted now and then by Brittany sniffing and blowing her nose.

* * *

The first case for jury draw was State of New Hampshire versus Arturo Hernandez: possession of three pounds of marijuana with the intent to sell. County Attorney Bill Powers, who loved the limelight almost as much as his sunlamp, was prosecuting.

It was past ten. Jury selection had been scheduled to start at nine and a hundred jurors were cooling their heels downstairs. That was all I could think about as Hernandez's attorney, Marvin Schwartz, lobbed one legal grenade after another onto my bench. Mistral's death and the fact that Brittany was sitting in my chambers, gorging on chocolate donuts, and playing a computer game I managed to scrounge up, had long since been pushed from my mind.

Marvin Schwartz said. "Your honor, all we're asking for is a jury of peers. We need to know which jurors may have used any illegal substances in the past."

Schwartz spoke with perfect diction. Never at a loss for the right word, he never wasted one either. With his signature bow tie and tweedy coat, he looked and acted like the slightly eccentric college professor, educating the jury that the correct answer to this quiz was: "not guilty." A small, slender man, he was unfailingly polite, virtually unflappable, and as nasty and tricky as a weasel.

"Your *complete* voir dire should have been submitted at the final pretrial last week. I've got a hundred jurors downstairs wondering what the hell is going on up here."

"I apologize, your honor, but I didn't think of it until over the weekend—" *I'll bet* "—and my client is constitutionally entitled to competent representation."

This was a defense attorney's trump card. Rule a defendant's motion as untimely because his lawyer filed it too late, and you've bought yourself a three-day hearing on a motion for a new trial based on ineffective assistance of counsel. The only way around the dilemma was to scold the defense attorney, overlook the tardiness, and in Schwartz's case, try to ignore his deliberate efforts to bait me.

I decided to leave the “too late” problem alone and proceeded directly to the merits of the motion. “I can’t ask a bunch of jurors whether any of them ever possessed a controlled substance? I’d have to warn every one of them of their Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination.”

“Your honor.” Schwartz slipped on a pair of half glasses and glanced at a pad of paper. “The Office of National Drug Control Policy reports that 35 per cent of the adult population has used or tried drugs at some time in their life. Article Fifteen of the New Hampshire Constitution guarantees my client the ‘judgment of his peers.’ If this jury contains no one who has ever used drugs, how can that be a jury of his peers?”

“With those statistics I’m sure the jury pool will include some jurors who’ve smoked marijuana.”

“If the court will guarantee that, I’ll happily withdraw my request,” Schwartz offered in a courtly manner.

“You know I can’t guarantee that.”

“That’s the problem, your honor, you can’t guarantee my client a jury of his peers, yet you are about to deny him his constitutional right to ensure it.”

“Your motion is denied.”

Hernandez threw up his arms in dismay and muttered in Spanish. Schwartz didn’t like his clients to interfere with his presentation of their cases, and he shot Hernandez a quick, hard glance. Putting his half glasses back on, Schwartz noted something on his legal pad, probably another issue he could appeal in case Hernandez was found guilty.

Behind and slightly off to the side of my bench was the judge’s door. No one else ever used it, not even the clerk. While Schwartz was moving on to another request, the door cracked open, slowly and ever so slightly. LL noticed it as well. For several hair-raising seconds

it stayed that way, neither opening more nor closing. I was so fixated on the door and who was behind it that I didn't even hear Schwartz's droning. It stayed that way, opening a crack more and then almost closing. My breath stopped. I half-expected to see a gun barrel poke through the crack. LL wasn't frozen to his seat like me. He came out of his chair and strode rapidly across the courtroom, his hand at his holster. Schwartz was dumbstruck.

It wasn't the first time I had witnessed LL's alertness. A month or so after I became a judge, a criminal defendant, bulked up with years of prison weightlifting, started towards me. As if he didn't have a care in the world, LL strolled into the well of the courtroom, placing himself between my would-be assailant and me. It must have been a second sense, an animal pheromone I couldn't smell, because LL gently said, "Son, you'd best sit down," and the defendant, like a whipped dog, stopped and then slunk back to his chair.

The door cracked wider, maybe an inch. I couldn't take my eyes off it. As LL vaulted the wooden railing that supposedly guarded my bench, the door swung back about a quarter of the way. LL unholstered his weapon. I prepared to meet my maker.

"Uncle Tony, the computer broke," Brittany whispered.

"We'll take the morning recess," I announced, sweeping up Brittany on my way out of the courtroom.

* * *

Because Schwartz had burned so much of my time and, more importantly, the jury's with his ceaseless motions and procedural issues, I finally threw up my hands and bumped the jury selection of State versus Hernandez to the following day. Once I did that, picking juries for the other cases on the docket proceeded smoothly, and I easily finished by midafternoon.

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To take Brittany's mind off Mistral, we went out for pizza, followed by a tour of the pet store and a trip to Annabelle's for ice cream cones. When we finally returned to Opal Street it was past nine and her bedtime, but a little more distraction at the hands of her doting aunt and uncle seemed called for.

We all sat at an old milking table in the family room, which was originally designed as the dining portion of an open concept floor plan. Across the room the television lackadaisically broadcast a baseball game between two generic teams, their rosters filled by players I had never heard of. As uninterested as the announcers, I nevertheless followed the action out of a corner of my eye, while the three of us played Hearts.

After Jen won her third hand Brittany asked, "You want to see Mistral's mane hairs again, Aunt Jenny?" This would have been the third time that day for each of us.

"Sure," Jen answered. As Brittany jumped up and ran toward the guest room, Jen added, "But put your pajamas on before you come back. It's way past your bedtime."

"Okay."

In a few minutes, dressed in a cotton nightgown patterned with a mare and her foal, Brittany returned with her knapsack and dug out the clump of mane. Reverently, she spread the horsehairs on the table.

"What are you going to do with them?" asked Jen.

"I dunno. Keep 'em."

"We could braid them and then make something pretty with the braid?"

"Could we?" Brittany's voice bubbled with excitement.

"Sure. How about a plume for your helmet?"

"Oooh, that'd be so cool."

"I'll need to get some ribbon and my scissors."

* * *

It was nearly eleven when Jen rolled into our bedroom. She slipped off her bathrobe, swung herself into bed and snuggled her head into the hollow of my shoulder. I knew exactly what was on her mind.

Tuesday

The next morning Brittany and I picked up LL, who proceeded to joke and chatter with her all the way to Bartholow Farm. A woman's age meant nothing to LL; it didn't matter if she was as old as Widow Buehler or as young as Brittany. Two X-chromosomes and LL felt it his bounden duty to flirt. At one time I had mentioned this to him, but the oddity of it never came close to penetrating his thick skull.

At Bartholow Farm I got out with Brittany to meet Mr. Klingman, her riding instructor, and to make certain everything was all set for her day. Klingman was dressed elegantly in tailored khaki riding breeches and tall cordovan riding boots. A lean young man without any sign of facial hair and a stainless steel rivet in one ear, I pegged him for one of Winny's retinue of pretty horsemen. But he couldn't have been sweeter to Brittany, and I could quickly see why she and her parents liked him so much.

As they hugged, he said, "Brittany, I'm so sorry about Mistral. Are you all right?"

She stepped back. "Look what my Aunt Jen and I made." She pointed to a plume of horsehair tied attached to the helmet. Jen had tied it together with blue ribbon and decorated it with a silver horse pin.

"Isn't that pretty?"

I inwardly winced, unsure about the etiquette of yanking locks off a dead horse for keepsakes, and hoped Brittany wouldn't say anything.

Undeterred by my mental telepathy, she explained, "It's from Mistral's mane."

"Brittany loved him," I said, attempting to mitigate any breach of deceased horse etiquette she might have committed.

Klingman leaned down for a closer look. "Really," he said and then added, "What a wonderful memento."

I gave him my number at the courthouse, explained that Jen would be there at four to pick her up, and kissed Brittany goodbye. Hand in hand with Klingman, she walked off toward the indoor riding ring.

* * *

On the way to the courthouse, I stopped for coffee, which was not my custom. As I climbed back in the car, LL observed, “You’re looking a bit peaked.”

“It’s Jen. She’s so damn determined to conceive. Whenever it’s the right time of month, she wakes me up at all hours trying to get pregnant.”

“A night like that and I feel as fresh as a daisy.”

“A night like that and you’d be pushing up daisies.”

“Why don’t you just knock her up and get it over with.”

“I wish it were that easy.”

LL smoothed his eyebrow, shielding his eyes, which I knew were dancing with mirth.

“Maybe it’s time to bring in the first team.”

“What team is that? The Viagras.”

“When it comes to lovin’, I don’t need any of that artificial stuff. I got all I need right here.” He pointed at his lap. “I can get all the references you want.”

* * *

The second day of jury selection in State versus Hernandez was a rehash of the first. That morning Schwartz had filed three more motions, including his fourth motion to suppress some of the evidence seized in the raid on Hernandez’s home. One floor down, the jurors

waited, wondering why they were unlucky enough to have to return for another day of jury selection.

I deferred hearing any more motions until the jury had been drawn. But even then, I had to listen for another ten minutes while Schwartz put into the record all his objections. Finally, I had the first group of potential jurors brought up. They looked like inmates from solitary emerging into the sunlight.

When they were finally settled, I introduced counsel, described the charge against Hernandez, and asked a series of questions to determine if any potential jurors were disqualified from sitting. One question was, “Have you read or heard anything about this case?”

The first juror chosen, an elementary school teacher, raised her hand and asked to approach the bench.

“Counsel.” I beckoned them forward as well.

The County Attorney smiled ingratiatingly as the juror passed him and followed her to the bench. Schwartz remained seated, writing something in his trial notebook.

“Good morning.” I said to the juror. Schwartz kept writing. “Counsel,” I ordered.

Schwartz slowly rose and with a stately step approached the bench.

I smiled to put her at ease. “Yes ma’am?”

Powers closed in around her to hear what she had to say. “I think I may have seen a report about this case on Seven on the Seacoast.”

I went down a litany of questions to make sure she would be objective and added a few extra to eliminate any chance that the Supreme Court might disagree with my opinion. Then I invited inquiry by counsel, window-dressing in the event there was an appeal. The County Attorney had none. I nodded at Schwartz to signal it was his turn to ask questions if he wished. He nibbled on the end of his glasses.

“Have you ever smoked marijuana or consumed any other illegal drug?”

“Don’t answer that question!” I barked to the juror who was as stunned by the question as she was by the vehemence of my response. I turned to Schwartz. “What are you thinking?”

He continued to nip at his glasses and innocently studied me like he was trying to figure out why I was upset. *As if he didn’t know.*

I asked the juror to step back. “I need to speak to counsel privately.” Then to Schwartz, my tone as hard as steel, I said, “I told you that was off limits. I ought to hold you in contempt of court for that.”

He still appeared perplexed. “I certainly didn’t intend to irritate you, your honor, but I do intend to advocate vigorously for my client. If that’s going to be a problem for you...” He didn’t finish, but he didn’t have to. What he left unsaid was that I should recuse myself from the case.

I could feel my face warm. “I expect you to represent your client to the best of your ability, but I also expect you to abide by my earlier ruling that jurors would not be questioned about their use of illegal substances.”

The jurors were all ears trying to overhear the commotion at the bench.

“Your honor,” Schwartz said, that perplexed look of innocence still writ all over his face. “You said *you* would not ask potential jurors about drug use, but you never said that counsel couldn’t.”

I just stared back at him in disbelief. Finally, I said, “You know exactly what I meant.”

“Your honor,” Schwartz whined like a basketball player called for traveling.

“I’ll see counsel in chambers! On the record!” To LL I said, “Have the jurors remain in the courtroom, this won’t take long.” I stomped off the bench.

By the end of the day we had picked four more jurors. At that rate Schwartz was on his way to holding the New Hampshire record for the longest jury selection ever.

* * *

As I was ready to leave, Margaret Grootemaart, the ancient doyenne of the clerk's office, knocked once, lightly and perfunctorily, and then came straightway into my chambers, as if she were the judge and not me. I suppose if tenure is any indication of ownership, Margaret, who had been at court longer than anyone could remember, had a greater right to my chambers than I did. But that didn't make it any easier to bear her attitude.

"I thought you had left," she said, explaining why we had the misfortune to meet face to face.

"Well, I'm about to."

"Oh," she said, implying that I was somehow cheating the State of New Hampshire by leaving early.

She held a pink message slip. "From your wife," she said, in the same tone she might have used to announce that my mistress was causing a scene in the courthouse lobby. The pink slip fluttered down onto my desk. It was from Jen. "Please call right away." The message had been received at three-seventeen that afternoon. I had obviously missed that deadline. Since I'd be home in a half an hour, I tucked the slip in my breast pocket.

I looked up at her. "Why didn't you give this to me earlier?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, a tiny sneer lurking at the corners of her thin lips. "I thought you didn't like to be disturbed while you're on the bench."

My tone turned sarcastic. "You could have at least left it in my chambers. That way I could have returned the call during a break."

“Sorry,” Margaret said, adding archly, “I mistakenly assumed you were busy.”

As she turned to leave, LL, ready to leave, appeared at the door. “Mag, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes.” Scowling, she attempted to pass, but LL, pretending that it was an invitation to dance, began to make a few ungainly steps, all the while deliberately blocking the doorway. Hands on hips, her face cast into a frown, Margaret glared at LL. He finally shuffled out of her way, feigning an attempt to pat her bottom good-bye as she passed. Hands still on her hips, she angrily clicked her way down the hall. In another minute she would be at her desk dialing Rockingham County’s Supervisory Justice Peter Gigas, and he, coughing and umming his way to a complete sentence, would soon be reproaching me to get LL to stop bothering Margaret.

“That was real smooth,” I said. “Thanks, that’ll bring Gigas down here in a heartbeat.”

“I think she likes me.” By now, LL was seated and reading my message upside down.

“Oho, sounds like she’s getting ready for one of those baby making orgies.”

“BDF, baby dancing fests,” I corrected him.

“I’d really like to come to one of those parties. I can be a real festive kind of guy.” LL batted his eyes.

“I don’t even want to think about it. Let’s go,” I said.

Following me, LL said, “If you’re having trouble getting her pregnant, maybe you should put some more men on it.”

* * *

When I pulled into our driveway, Brittany and Jen were playing wheelchair hoops, Brittany rolling around on Jen’s Quickie Shadow Racer. Both stopped to let me pull into my side of the garage.

As soon as I emerged from the car, Jen spoke to me, her voice tight, trying to conceal from Brittany how upset she actually was. “Didn’t you get my message?”

I pulled the pink message from my pocket. “Margaret delivered it just as a I was leaving.”

Frowning, Jen shook her head. “Some pervert tried to abduct Brittany while she was riding today.”

“What!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, Uncle Tony, I was riding Aero Dynamique and a man ran out of the woods and tried to grab me.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, she’s not,” Jen said. “She was pretty shook up.” Brittany vigorously nodded agreement.

“Who was this guy?”

“He had a mask on,” Brittany answered, nervously spinning the wheelchair from side to side. “Like a clown’s.”

I turned back to Jen. “Thank God, she got away.” I didn’t even want to think about what I might have had to tell Sal if she hadn’t. “What happened?”

“Brittany was riding by herself on a woods trail not far from the farm—”

“Mr. Klingman said I was big enough,” she said proudly.

Jen continued, “When this man with a mask ran out and tried to grab her. The horse panicked—”

Brittany broke in. “Aero saved my life, Uncle Tony. Really. He reared way up; I almost fell off. Then Aero galloped away so fast the bad man couldn’t catch us. You believe me, don’t you Uncle Tony?”

“Of course, I do. That’s horrible. Did you see where the man went?”

“I think he ran back into the woods,” she replied vaguely.

“Have you called your parents?”

Jen answered, “As soon as we got in, but they were out at dinner. We left a message at the hotel. Want to play a little horse?”

“Sure,” I said, as if I were really excited about the idea. I knew Jen was trying to keep Brittany distracted. “Two of you against me. Loser does the dishes.”

“Better go put on your apron now, Tony, because us girls are going to kick butt,” Jen said.

“Yeah Uncle Tony, we’re going to kick your butt.”

I slipped off my coat and tie. “Talk’s cheap, ladies. You go first.”

We had been playing about ten minutes—I was leading slightly, absorbing a great deal of verbal abuse, and getting ready to start throwing the game—when the portable telephone hanging from Jen’s chair rang.

Jen answered. “Hi, sorry to scare you. Don’t worry. Everything is fine...” Jen repeated the story for the benefit of Brittany’s parents and then handed the telephone to her.

Brittany answered their questions matter-of-factly, as if she didn’t want to worry them. But as they said their “goodbyes” and “love-yous,” her eyes filled up and she choked back her crying. She held the phone out for me. “My Daddy wants to talk to you Uncle Tony.”

Sal asked, “Tony, have the police caught this son of a bitch?”

“I don’t know. I’ll call the police department and see where their investigation stands.”

“Sorry this has turned into such a disaster.”

“Hey Sal, we’re just so relieved she’s all right. Don’t worry a second about us. We love having her, even if she is a lousy basketball player.” Brittany slapped my leg. “Don’t worry. We’ll take good care of this girl until you get back. I promise.” I clicked the phone off.

I turned to Jen. “I’m going in and call the police.”

“I should start dinner.”

“Looks like you girls will be doing what women are supposed to do...the dishes!”

Brittany slugged me again on the leg. “Uncle Tony!”

* * *

The Portsmouth Police Department had no record of any call from Bartholow Farms. I couldn’t believe it and telephoned Bartholow Farms, but the main switchboard had closed and I couldn’t reach anyone. I looked up Brittany’s instructor, Mr. Klingman’s phone number. His address was Shore Road, Portsmouth, making me assume it was his private line at the Farm.

He picked up on the first ring. He remembered who I was and had no idea if the police were called.

“What do you mean, you don’t know if the police were called?”

“Well, I reported what happened to Brittany to Stevie Holmes, the farm manager, but I don’t know what he did.”

“Did the police come to the farm?” I asked.

“As far as I know they didn’t, but I knocked off a little early today so they may have come down after I finished.”

“How do I get in touch with this Stevie Holmes?”

He gave me a number. I called and left a message on his answering machine to call me back. Still rolling around in Jen's racing chair, Brittany was in the kitchen while Jen prepared hamburgers and salad for dinner.

"Brittany," I asked, "did any police officer talk to you?"

She stopped her chair long enough to answer, "Nope."

"Did anyone talk about calling the police?"

Brittany shrugged uncertainly. "I don't think so."

"That's just great," I muttered to myself.

* * *

About ten that night, Stevie Holmes returned my call. Although I'd never met him, he sounded as if we were old friends. "Hello Judge, what can I do for you?"

"I don't understand. My niece nearly gets abducted, and no one calls the police. I mean what kind of operation are you running down there?"

"Whoa, Judge," he replied, trying to settle me down. "We should have called you, and I do apologize for that, but if we called the police every time a little girl has some fantasy, they'd be out here every other day."

"Fantasy? Brittany was scared out of her wits."

"I'm sure she was, but these girls, particularly those around horses, possess vivid imaginations. I've seen it time and time again. A squirrel spooks a horse, and by the time they come in from the ride, it was a bear...his fangs dripping with blood." He chuckled.

"I know my niece pretty well. She doesn't have a runaway imagination."

"Believe me Judge, I speak from years of experience, girls come in from trail rides all the time with the most fantastic fairytales that they are convinced are absolutely true."

“So you haven’t done anything about this.”

“If we’ve done something wrong, it was certainly not deliberate. But under the circumstances we don’t want to be the ones to cry ‘wolf.’ I reluctant to say this, but to be honest, she seemed more excited to be the center of attention than she was upset, if you know what I mean.”

* * *

Jen was waiting in bed. She was naked, and the top was off the small bottle of olive oil. Lubricants were an awkward prerequisite to intercourse with a paraplegic, but God only knows where Jen had learned that vegetable oils are more hospitable to sperm than KY jelly. Since we had switched to olive oil, our bedroom began to smell more and more like my mother’s kitchen, which was not always arousing. It felt like exam week, two more days to go. She immediately rolled into my embrace and her warm skin felt good. As she traced fingers over my face and nuzzled into my neck, my earlier reservations began to disappear as fast as my libido heated up.

Even with paralyzed legs, Jen had not lost her cheerleader figure. After her accident she had been determined not to gain weight. She did stomach crunches by the millions, push-ups, chin-ups, and raced in her wheelchair every chance she got. Her upper body strength was easily equal to mine and her stomach as hard as a body-builder’s. I brushed my hands along her side and back, feeling the swells and curves of her figure. Kissing deeply and long, neither one of us wanted to pull away. We drew our bodies closer together, pressing hard against one another.

When Jen reached for the olive oil, I wouldn’t have cared if it were motor oil. Baby making was no longer on my mind. Neither was baby dancing. Nor was I thinking about tender lovemaking. This was plain old, fraternity style fucking. Jen joined in my passion, but her reasons that I knew were quite different.

Spent, I rolled onto my back. All business, Jen arranged the pillow under her hips. Dreamily, she said, "I know this sounds crazy, but after we make love, if I close my eyes and concentrate, not too hard, more like letting go, I swear I can feel your sperm moving. Like little polliwogs on the bottom of the pond. Weird, isn't it?"

"Frankly I thought my sperm would feel a lot more like a small tuna."

My bantering didn't move Jen off track. "A lot of women say they actually feel the moment of conception, like some psychic spark."

I couldn't resist. "A telepathic Paul Revere: 'the baby is coming. The baby is coming.'"

Jen gave my shoulder a joshing shove. "I shouldn't have told you."

"Speaking of someone's imagination, that was Stevie Holmes on the phone. He never called the police about Brittany."

"What!"

"Says that little girls are always making up stories, turning a routine event into some extraordinary story."

"You believe that? You saw Brittany; you heard her."

"I know, I know," I explained, "But when you get done talking about feeling sperm swimming, well, it sort of confirms what we men think about women."

Jen shoved me again, more forcefully this time. "You're going to call the police, I hope."

"In the morning," I answered, but I wasn't so sure anymore and wanted to sleep on it.

Wednesday

I didn't call the police the next day, even though I kept meaning to. At first, I chalked it up to being that kind of day. Later, based on my nagging doubts about Brittany's story, it seemed more like a Freudian slip.

State versus Hernandez was the same-old, same-old. It took an hour and a half of verbal wrestling with Schwartz before we were ready to select jurors again. The first chosen was a retired plumber, who had worked at the Naval Shipyard. When his name was called, he asked to approach the bench. Counsel followed.

At the bench he said, "Judge, you asked about relatives who were police officers. My uncle was a policeman in Lowell."

"How well did you know him?" I asked.

"Hardly at all. He died when I was just a kid, maybe six years old."

Although that should have been the end of it, I recited a catechism of questions to ensure that he could be fair. Afterward I asked counsel, "Any questions?"

Both shook their heads, "No."

"Qualified," I declared and our fifth juror was seated. In ten minutes, no less. I felt a small glow of triumph.

Before the next juror's name was drawn, Schwartz asked to return to the bench.

"What?" I asked impatiently.

Schwartz massaged the frame of his hanging glasses, a quizzical cast to his face. "Your honor, you qualified that juror."

"Yes," I answered, waiting for him to make the first gambit.

"Well, he's the nephew of a police officer and clearly shouldn't sit on a criminal case."

"I asked you if you wanted to voir dire him. You never uttered a single word," I argued.

“With all due respect, his lack of qualification was so manifestly evident I saw no need to. I was shocked when you let him sit.”

“What do you mean, you’re shocked? You never objected!”

“I don’t think I should be forced to object in front of a juror who we all know will be disqualified.”

I leaned forward so I could speak directly to Schwartz. In a whisper I slammed the words onto the record. “Regardless of how much you think you know Attorney Schwartz, in my court you will make an objection instead of whining about a ruling later!”

Schwartz’s watery blue eyes were as guileless as the sky. “Your honor, I take exception to your characterization of my conduct as ‘whining.’ I hope the court is not trying to intimidate me into affording my client some lesser degree of advocacy.”

“You know very well...” I didn’t finish, not wanting to say something I’d regret later. “My ruling stands and the juror’s qualified,” I declared.

Setting his glasses on his nose so he could jot another judicial error onto his pad, Schwartz said, “As you wish, your honor,” and returned to his seat.

The rest of the day went along like that, but thank the Lord at least we were drawing jurors. By four-thirty we had picked seven more and had three to go.

Thursday

At lunchtime, my supervisory judge, Peter Gigas, materialized at my chambers door, carrying an insulated nylon lunch bag. For a guy who never rubbed shoulders with anyone and who spent most of his days locked in his office gossiping on the telephone— “As supervisory justice I have certain political responsibilities” —having him suddenly appear with his lunch was not a good sign, not at all. Gigas had shed his robe in favor of his suit coat. Dressing down to make me more at ease, I was sure.

“Is this a good time?” he asked from the doorway.

“Fine,” I replied, in what would be only the first in a long string of lies.

I had a Pepsi from the bailiffs’ refrigerator, a Granny Smith apple, and a pita and peanut butter sandwich. From his nylon insulated lunch bag, Gigas pulled a bottled water and a plastic storage container divided into sections containing meatloaf, pasta salad, and applesauce. Wrapped in a large cloth napkin were a stainless fork and spoon.

By the time he had it all set up, I had almost finished my sandwich.

“Well,” he said, “What’s new?”

I spun my wedding band around my finger, and answered that the Red Sox had demoted their knuckleball pitcher back to the bullpen, which in my opinion was a terrible mistake. “Either his knuckler’s on or it’s not. If it’s on, he’ll give you six or seven good innings. You get to rest your other starters for an extra day. That’s a big plus...” Gigas’ eyes soon glazed over.

I had moved onto who should bat third and who should lead off, when Gigas interrupted. “I did want to bring one thing to your attention. Margaret complained that your bailiff harassed her.” He sighed as if delivering this message disturbed him, when the opposite

was true. Gigas loved meddling in personnel matters. He could take a courthouse dust devil and wind it up into a statewide tornado.

“Really,” I said, pretending to rack my memory. “I can’t think of anything ... except she did deliver a message and ... let’s see, I do remember that she and LL met in the doorway. They had one of those after-you-Alphonse dances, you know, and then she left.”

“She says he behaved lewdly and tried to...” Gigas waved his hand around as if to explain. “Well, tried to spank her...her derriere.”

“Is that what she said, Peter, derriere?”

Gigas cleared his throat. “You get the point. This is highly inappropriate conduct anyplace but particularly in a courthouse. And especially by a bailiff.” He looked pointedly at me and then adjusted his already straight tie. “Tony, your bailiff is becoming a bit of an embarrassment.” He coughed quietly into the back of his hand. “And it is beginning to reflect on you.”

“Each one of us has our own crosses to bear,” I replied.

Gigas silently tallied all the crosses he was carrying. “Yes, yes, I suppose so. On a cheerier note, how is your trial coming?”

“Fine,” I replied.

“And Marvin, how’s he behaving?”

“Marvin’s Marvin,” I answered.

“You can’t trust him. He’s always got something up his sleeve.” Gigas coughed again to clear something nonexistent from his throat. “Have you ever had any trouble with him, ethical indiscretions, lying to opposing counsel, even to the court, that sort of thing?”

His description of Schwartz, albeit a bit hyperbolic, was not far from the mark. Still, given the choice, I’d rather spend a day in the courtroom with Marvin than a lunch hour with

Gigas. “Nothing that I can’t handle. He’s hard-nosed, and he doesn’t give any quarter, but he doesn’t ask for any either.”

“I’m surprised. Most everyone else has had at least a few instances of Marvin cutting a corner.” Gigas tried to suppress a cackle, but a few abbreviated syllables still escaped. “Back in the old days, when he first started practicing, I had quite a few cases with him. You had to watch him like a hawk. Slipperier than an eel. I can’t tell you the number of lies and perjured testimony he’d foist on judges, juries, and brother attorneys. It’s too bad, because he’s a very talented attorney.”

Somehow, Gigas had goaded me into defending Schwartz. “I haven’t had any problems like that,” I responded.

“Maybe you’re not keeping a close enough eye on him. I wouldn’t trust anything the man says or does.” He got up to leave. “You will speak to your bailiff, won’t you?”

“Absolutely,” I lied, as Gigas headed out the door.

* * *

The weather that day had been stifling and heavy with moisture. By the time I got home, there was no relief. To escape the oppressive humidity and heat, we decided to go for a boat ride down to Hampton Beach for a supper of hot dogs, fried dough, pizza, and ice-cream cones. We moored our Boston Whaler at my sister Lucy’s place on Sagamore Creek. They’d had the same idea, and their boat was already gone. We motored down the creek, out through Little Harbor, and into the Atlantic where we turned south, following the New Hampshire coastline.

We rounded Odiorne Point and Bartholow Farms came into view, sitting back from the shore, surveying the largest undeveloped parcel of privately owned oceanfront on the coast. I

broke out a cold six-pack. A barely perceptible swell gently rocked the boat and lapped at the string of beaches that lined the coast, Brewer Beach, Wallis Sands, Rye Beach, and finally Hampton Beach. The warmth inland had driven everyone to the beaches so that even past six they were still full of people: dog walkers, Frisbee players, picnickers, children playing in the waves, bocce bowlers, and plenty of plain sitters. By the time we reached Hampton Harbor, I had finished two beers.

Pinocchios in Toyland, we partook of every diversion Hampton Beach had to offer. We played video games in the arcades, shot basketballs for prizes, ate salt-water taffy, and fed popcorn to the seagulls. A street artist painted Jen and Brittany's faces.

"Come on, Uncle Tony, get your face painted," Brittany pleaded, tugging my arm.

"I don't think so!" There was something about a superior court judge cavorting around Hampton Beach tricked out with rainbows and butterflies on his cheeks that gave me pause.

Jen, who was having a butterfly painted on one cheek, said, "She'll do the scales of justice."

"No!" I said, trying not to lose my tug of war with Brittany.

"How about a skull and crossbones," Jen teased.

"Yeah, skull and crossbones," Brittany repeated.

"No."

I hated to admit it, but the crossed cutlasses on my left cheek did add a certain tattooed swagger to my step for the rest of the evening. Fortunately, as far as I could tell, this dip into foolishness was not witnessed by anyone who knew me. That is until just before we left.

With a child's innocence and enthusiasm, Brittany joyfully raced from one arcade to the next street vendor, knowing intuitively that on that magical night her Uncle Tony and Aunt Jenny could deny her nothing. Like a childless couple using the neighbor's kid as their excuse to

watch a Disney movie, Jen and I were having more fun than Brittany. As we watched her squealing at video games, running across the beach, and gumming her face with cotton candy, we frequently caught each other's eyes. Each of us fantasizing, what if this were our little girl? The dream redoubled our pleasure.

Several times a counter-kid or token-taker would mistake Brittany for our child, and Jen and I would smile with pride. Even Brittany seemed to notice. "He thought you were my parents," she'd said, laughing at the mistake but not bothering to correct it, as if she too were enjoying being part of our make-believe family.

A full moon, veiled by the humidity, cast a wavy reflection on the water. Like a black cat, the ocean gently lapped the moonlit sand. We walked along the concrete seawall, Brittany pushing Jen's wheelchair. The night and mood were infectious. Children behaved, parents laughed, and teenagers didn't swear. People nodded and smiled at our improvisation of the perfect paraplegic family. Jen had never grown accustomed to the glances her wheelchair elicited, and from experience I knew what she thought people whispered: "What do you suppose happened to her. That poor man." But that night, reveling in her role as mother, Jen welcomed the looks, smiling back, as if all was right in the world.

None of us wanted it to end, and we didn't start to leave until ten-thirty. We were walking back to Hampton Harbor, where our boat was docked, when Winny Bartholow sauntered down the sidewalk, trailed by Klingman and two other young men from the stables. As the night grew older and its denizens younger, Winny's spiky, platinum hair fit right in with the hip-hop crowd that had started to emerge.

"Judge Tony," he said, shaking my hand warmly, while staring at Jen, obviously trying to recall her name.

She ended the awkwardness by extending her hand. "Jen Paris."

“Of course, my dear, of course. Nice to see you again. Are you feeling better?”

Jen’s eyes hardened. “I feel fine.”

Turning to Brittany, he said in an affected childlike voice, “And Brittany, I understand you gave us quite a fright, young lady.”

“Hello, Mr. Bartholow,” she said, her eyes cast down. “Hi, Mr. Klingman.”

Without touching me, Bartholow traced the cutlass on my cheek with his index finger. “So apropos of a ruthless judge,” he said in a musical voice. “I must have one.” His entourage laughed.

I flushed with embarrassment, to the obvious pleasure of Winny and his friends. “The artist is about two blocks down, on the seawall.” I pointed behind us.

Our respective groups had slowly orbited around Winny and me so that they were now on opposite sides from where we had first met. Jen and Brittany had started to ease even farther away. Winny put his arm across my shoulders. A couple inches taller than my height of six-one, Winny’s body had a middle-aged softness. He whispered into my ear, “Brittany seems fine, wouldn’t you say, Judge Tony?” Pulling away, he added, “I’m not surprised.”

“What’d he whisper?” Jen asked as I rejoined them.

“I’ll tell you later.”

The cooler ocean stole some of the moisture from the air and condensed it into scattered, shallow clouds of fog, floating right above the surface. On the water and away from the garish neon of Hampton Beach, the moon colored the mists a ghostly white. A necklace of lights marked the shoreline. To the north, the Isles of Shoals lighthouse beckoned.

“All right Brittany, Uncle Tony is going to have a beer, and since he is very opposed to drinking and driving, he is about to entrust his future and probably the safety of the entire free

world into your competent hands. You take the first watch while your Uncle Tony cuddles with your Aunt.”

“Ooh,” Brittany squealed in disgust.

“See the lighthouse? Just head for that.”

After I slowed the boat to half throttle, Brittany took my place. Kneeling on the seat, her eyes riveted to the lighthouse ahead, and with the solemn mien of great responsibility, she assumed the helm. I helped Jen move to the bench seat in front of the console. Once next to her, I cracked open a beer, put an arm around my bride. The Atlantic had finally begun to cool the air and, snuggling against me, Jen shoved her hands under my shirt for warmth. With Brittany directly behind us, that was as intimate as we got.

* * *

We didn’t get home until nearly midnight. After making Brittany swear never to tell her parents how late we kept her out, she went to bed. Jen tucked her in and said prayers with her. Even with the television on, I could hear Brittany’s devout recitation of the Our Father. Only nine and she was a better Catholic than I.

A few minutes later, dressed in her bathrobe, Jen rolled into the family room. “You ready for bed?”

I knew what lay ahead. “Let’s take a night off. It’s so hot in here.” I held up the last beer. “And I’m beat.”

Jen’s lips turned up with winsome understanding, while her eyes mockingly reproached me. “You have to want a baby after tonight. I saw the way you were looking at Brittany.”

“I was going to nominate you for an Academy Award: an unforgettable portrayal of a mother.”

“Come on, Tony, let’s just try. We committed to making this baby together.”

“I’ve already made enough bambinos this week. We don’t have to do it every twelve hours.”

Jen tried to keep her tone upbeat and light, but I could make out the disappointment at the corners of her mouth. “Okay, but you have to promise we’ll do it in the morning.”

Friday

The red numerals on the clock radio read “3:46” when Jen’s crying woke me.

“Honey, you all right?”

“I’m fine. Sorry I woke you.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Tony, I want our own baby, not some borrowed child.”

Believing she was upset about skipping intercourse, I threw an arm over her and drew her closer. “I’m really sorry. It’s just so hot and I was bushed. If I had known....”

“That’s not what’s bothering me. I just know this time is going to be like all the others. It’s driving me crazy. I know it’s not the end of the world.” Jen reached for a tissue and blew her nose hard. “I just want to conceive so much.”

“We will, honey, we will.” I moved closer and burrowed my nose in her hair.

“Why can’t I have a baby like everyone else? Is that too much to ask?” She shifted around to face me. “I never complained after my accident, did I?”

“No,” I answered truthfully, she never had. I had complained. Not to her, but I had to others, and a lot to myself.

“I’m a good person. I do all the right things. And what’s my reward?” Jen snorted bitterly. “My period.”

I pulled her closer, feeling her moist cheek against my chest.

Jen pushed herself a small ways back and declared, “I don’t want to go to church this weekend.”

Sundays were sacred in our family, for on Sundays—only God knows for how many generations—the entire Parisi family attended mass followed by Sunday dinner. When it came to attendance—well actually, when it came to most anything related to my family—I was the

rebellious one, the black sheep of the family. But we had already made plans to go that coming Sunday.

I let Jen vent. “Lucy, Roseanne, Barbara, Nonie, I can hear them all now. ‘Are you pregnant yet?’ Why can’t they leave me alone? Especially, Nonie. I know she means well, but I get so sick of hearing—” Jen mimicked my mother’s Italian accent “—‘Tony’s dad and I were lucky. As soon as we got married, I started getting pregnant. But don’t you worry,’ she’ll say, ‘it’ll happen for you too.’”

“It will,” I consoled, having heard this complaint before.

Jen nestled closer to me, pressing her head back against my chest. Her sniffing subsided, and we lay in silence. I knew what she was thinking.

Once Jen had made up her mind to conceive, there was no turning back. She had always been driven, and adversity only annealed her resolution. Like most paraplegics, at first she was certain she would walk again. When that dream evaporated, she became even more determined not to surrender to her limitations. Like a prisoner, she hurled herself against the walls of her disability. Every obstacle between her and what she perceived as independence became her sworn enemy. Physical impediments, pity, prejudices, and even inadvertent oversights were all assailed in her personal struggle. Her compulsion to be self-reliant and normal almost cost us our marriage.

“Are you still awake?” Jen asked after a few minutes.

“Wide awake.”

“I know something that will help you get back to sleep.” Jen pulled away and unbuttoned her man’s pajama tops.

Making love in the middle of the night is so unexpected, and for that reason so wonderful. Untethered from the real world, the act becomes its own capsule, drifting timelessly

in another dimension. Nothing intruded on our thoughts; neither sleep nor work summoned. Time became, like the air we breathe, taken for granted, never weighed or measured. It could last forty-five minutes or five. It didn't matter.

Jen was on her side, her legs pulled up, and I was behind her. There was no need for talking, and dreamily—my eyes were closed and I suspect Jen's were as well—we barely moved. My hands were slippery with olive oil, and I stroked her as if I was applying a precious unguent. The unhurried rhythm of our union consumed us, and we disappeared into another state of consciousness, half awake, half asleep, only the touch of our bodies connecting us to reality.

Jen cocked her head and whispered, "Did you hear that?"

"No," I breathed still lost in our reverie.

"Listen!" Jen's voice was low, but more urgent.

Holding still, I lifted my head off the pillow. There was a rustling, like a chipmunk nosing around a pile of leaves. Mice, I thought, not in the mood to do anything about them right then. Almost reflexively my hips began to move again, and I dropped my head back to the pillow. Jen's upper body was still rigid with attention.

"Mice," I murmured into her ear as I stroked her breasts. *Mice? We didn't have mice!*

Then I heard a footfall. Jen heard it too. A rush of adrenaline shot through me. Neither of us moved a muscle. Breathing ceased. Slowly and carefully I lifted my head so I could see over Jen into the hall, illuminated by the nightlight. The noise sounded like it came from the hall or guestroom. *Guestroom! Where Brittany was sleeping.* Keeping my eye on the hall, I started to back out of the bed as quietly as I could. Jen never moved, her eyes fixed on the hall. I had one bare foot on the carpet when a shadow stealing down the hall momentarily eclipsed the nightlight. For a second his left arm was illuminated, enough so that I noticed it was discolored. A huge birthmark? Tattoos?

“Hey,” I yelled, and took off after him. Shorter than me and squat, he ran with a rolling gait. He flew through the slider door, left wide open, and out into the backyard. I continued the chase until my bare feet touched grass, and I suddenly realized that my feet weren’t the only part of me naked. The intruder never looked back and a moment later disappeared for good.

* * *

Jen was up and checking on Brittany. I called the Portsmouth P.D. Then she and I began a quick inspection to see what had been stolen. It wasn’t as if we had a bunch of treasures lying around. Jen’s jewelry seemed to be all there, my wallet was still in my jeans pocket, and her laptop hadn’t been moved from her canvas bag. Brittany, bless her heart, slept through the whole thing. I was very grateful for that. The kid had been through enough excitement that week without experiencing the ingredients for a few more nightmares. By the time the police arrived, we were pretty certain our intruder hadn’t stolen anything.

I knew the police officer, Jonathan Clay. He’d been with the Department for a few years. Despite his odd looks—too tight skin that accentuated every bony protuberance—and formal police mannerisms, he was considered an up and coming officer. Jen thought he was kind of cute.

“Good evening, Judge Paris.”

“Officer Clay, it’s almost morning,” I corrected him.

Without the slightest offense, he replied, “Of course it is. But when you’ve been on the third shift as long as I have, well, it just seems like evening.” He smiled cheerily.

“Would you like me to put some coffee on?” Jen offered.

“That’d be great,” he answered and commenced his investigation by slumping into one of the chairs at the milking table. Taking out his notebook, he filled in the blanks on his form and then asked some basic questions, like where the burglar’s point of entry was.

“Through the slider,” I answered, pointing at it. “It was so hot I left it open.”

“Uh-huh.” Flashlight in hand, he rose reluctantly from the table and examined the sliding screen. He stepped out into our backyard, and asked, “Which way did he go from here.” I pointed, and Clay headed off, the flashlight’s beam sweeping across the ground ahead of him. Five minutes later he was back at the family room table, stretching out his long legs to get comfortable.

“Is anyone beside you looking for this guy?” I asked.

Clay grinned, a goofy, good-natured smile. “Judge, there are two cruisers out there right now, but so far we don’t know what we’re looking for.” Clay pulled out a pad and pen. “Did you see his face?”

“No.”

“Height? Weight?”

“He was short, around five-five, I’d guess, and thick. Not fat, more muscular.”

“Hair color?”

I compressed my lips and shook my head.

“How was he dressed?”

“I remember running shoes and jeans, maybe a tee shirt.”

“Any distinguishing features?”

“His forearms look discolored. I barely glimpsed them, but I was thinking birthmarks or tattoos. But it just as easily could have been the shadows, or maybe he had a long sleeved shirt on with dark sleeves.”

Clay asked another question. “Did you see a car?”

“I was barefoot and only chased him off the property.” I decided not to share that I was naked, slathered in olive oil, and had just...well...

“Cream or sugar?” Jen called from the kitchen.

“Both, ma’am. Thanks.”

Jen wheeled around the counter separating the kitchen from the family area balancing a mug of coffee and some muffins on a tray.

After laying on his appreciation too thick for my taste, Clay lifted his beak-like nose and sniffed. “Do you smell olive oil?”

Blushing, Jen rolled her eyes and left me to answer. “Probably from dinner,” I answered. “We had pasta.”

“Smells like someone spilled the bottle. You may want to check,” he said and then returned to interviewing us.

Only a minute or so later there was a knock on the breezeway door. I walked over to the top of the wheelchair ramp and waved LL in. “Well this is a pleasant surprise. Do come in,” I said with mock courtesy, as if he had dropped over for a late afternoon beer.

“I heard someone broke in, and I wanted to make sure you’re all right.” Whispering as we passed the kitchen, he added, “And Portsmouth P.D. couldn’t catch a frog.”

I wasn’t surprised LL had heard about the attempted burglary. His network of friends, former state police colleagues, informants, snitches, rats, and gossips kept him abreast of whatever was happening. As far as I could tell, there were very few secrets on the Seacoast that LL wasn’t privy to.

I offered, “Want a cup of coffee?”

“Don’t mind if I do.” He asked Jen, “You all right?”

She smiled at LL, glad to see him. “We’re fine, and nothing appears to be missing.”

I brought LL’s coffee—two sugars, no cream—to the table. It typified our relationship that I knew what my bailiff took with his coffee, but I doubted he had a clue as to how I drank mine.

Scratching the back of his head, LL asked, “How long was he in the house?”

“We don’t know,” Jen answered. “He woke us up.” Glancing at me, she raised her eyebrows playfully.

LL noticed her glance and snuck a quick peek at me. “And nothing’s missing.”

“No,” Jen answered.

“Where was he when you woke up?”

“Our end of the hall or the guestroom,” I replied.

“Is Brittany in the guestroom?” LL asked.

Clay looked up quizzically from his reports. “Brittany?”

“My niece,” I explained. “She’s staying with us this week.”

Clay asked, “Did she see the burglar?”

“She never woke up,” I answered.

Clay turned to LL. “Could be a pedophile.”

“I thought of that, too,” Jen said. “I checked the bed, her blankets, nightgown, nothing appeared to have been disturbed. On the other hand, she didn’t even wake up when I was checking her.”

LL silently ruminated, tugging on an earlobe. The front door bell rang, and I went to open it. Through the picture window I could see a Portsmouth Police Department cruiser parked in the driveway behind LL’s ten-year old Cadillac. I escorted the officer into the family room where he informed Clay that he hadn’t found anything.

Jen offered him coffee. Sitting down, he gratefully accepted. When Jen returned, this time with the whole pot, he was eyeing the muffins.

“Have one,” she offered.

Clay’s walkie-talkie emitted unintelligible squawking, which he apparently comprehended for he pulled it out of its holster and said something, the gist of which was that he and the other patrolman were at our house.

A few minutes later, another cruiser and officer arrived, again with nothing to report. At first he politely declined Jen’s offer of coffee and muffins, explaining that they had to get back on duty. But after Clay, his patrol supervisor, nodded his okay, he joined us at the table. Our family room looked like the lunchroom at the police department.

When Jen returned, still in her bathrobe, one of the patrolmen raised his nose, sniffing the air. “What’s that I smell?”

“I smelled it too,” Clay said. “It’s olive oil.” Jen’s eyes closed with mortification. “You must have spilled some someplace,” Clay suggested for the second time.

LL chimed in. “I smell it too; I just couldn’t put a name to it. But you’re right, it’s olive oil.”

I gave Jen a dirty look. After all, the nonsense with the olive oil had been her idea. “We had pasta last night,” I explained lamely.

“You must use a lot of olive oil,” one of the officers said, satisfied with my answer.

“Oh indeed we do,” I said with comic emphasis for Jen’s benefit.

“Olive oil, you say,” said LL, his voice sauced with suspicion.

It was past five by the time the last of our early morning visitors cleared out. They departed without any leads and even fewer ideas. Their guesses ranged from a pervert to a schizo to an inept burglar. Officer Jonathan Clay was next to last to leave. He couldn’t thank

Jen enough, which was becoming sickening, but he did reassure us that the police reports would not be made public. I had requested that courtesy. Since Brittany had never woken up, I figured, after the episode at the farm, that what her parents didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

LL was last to leave. I walked him to the breezeway door while Jen finished cleaning up. His immaculately polished Cadillac reflected what little light there was. He halted before climbing in. A lascivious smile unfurled across his face. "Judge," he said formally. LL never called me judge, except at court or when he wanted to yank my chain. "I'd like to learn more about this olive oil stuff. Add it to my repertoire." LL pronounced "rep-ort-tore," like a New Hampshire hick, completely ignoring his French-Canadian ancestry.

I shook my head. "I'll pick you up at the regular time."

Jen had left the dishes in the sink. I started to rinse them and stick them in the dishwasher when she reappeared.

"Tony, we have to make love," she said with the same tone of voice she used to remind me to take out the trash.

"Forget it." I didn't intend to leave any opening for debate. "I'm going to take a shower to get this ridiculous smell off me, and then I'm going to try to get a little sleep."

Jen cocked her head with remorse. "Yeah, sorry about the olive oil."

"I don't care what we use, but we are done with that!" I stamped across the living room toward the hall and our bedroom.

"I'll find something else," she shouted after me.

"Good."

"But you have to promise to do it later today. Our last time was Wednesday night."

"Okay," I said over my shoulder, without thinking about what I was agreeing to.

* * *

All the way to the courthouse, LL said nothing, but a shit-eating smirk was plastered all over his face. I refused to stoop to his level and kept my mouth shut. But when he started giggling, I couldn't hold back any longer, and the two of us chortled like preteen boys laughing at their first dirty joke.

I still hadn't called the police to report Brittany's story about the man chasing her. Piggybacking it onto our would-be burglar seemed like we were crying wolf. Our report on our intruder was flimsy enough. He disappears without a trace, empty-handed and without disturbing even a dust kitty, and we had only the vaguest description. I wasn't ready to impeach the Paris family's credibility further by broaching a nine year old's tale of a near abduction without a single witness, which was disbelieved by the entire staff at Bartholow Farms. Explaining my lackadaisical attitude to my brother Sal was another problem, but that could wait until he and Barbara returned. Right then, I had all I could handle with Marvin Schwartz.

He had called the clerk, Ralph Beaudoin, informing him that he was "not well" and wouldn't be able to make Friday's session. I knew that this was one more of his ploys to throw a monkey wrench into the case. Ralph was waiting opposite my desk to see what I wanted to do.

"Call Schwartz and tell him that I expect him to be here by eleven, or I want a telephone call from his doctor. If he doesn't show up or we don't hear from his doctor, the sheriff's liveried limousine service will be there ten minutes later to pick him up."

Ralph, always the good clerk, showed no emotion either way. I couldn't decide if he thought I was some kind of monster or genius. "I'll call Marvin and let him know."

I left to inform the jury that there would be another delay. LL went with me, probably because he was worried that the jurors might physically attack me.

Five minutes later Ralph returned to my chambers. "Marvin will be here by eleven."

“Good,” I said, smiling, knowing that I had called his bluff and pleased that at least we would get in a half a day of jury selection.

Schwartz didn’t appear until eleven-twenty, hoping to goad me into supplying him with another reason to have me disqualified. Before sitting down, he laid out on counsel table all sorts of nostrums for the common cold: lozenges, cough syrup, and a half dozen individually wrapped pills. Unshaven, his clothes rumpled, he regularly and loudly blew his nose and coughed.

In a feeble, reedy voice, he asked, “May I approach the bench?”

“On the record or off?”

Acting surprised that I would even consider listening to him off the record, Schwartz proclaimed, “On.”

“Yes,” I said as he and County Attorney Powers reached the bench.

“Your honor, based upon your conduct toward me this morning,” he whispered as if each word were formed with his last breath, “disbelieving a senior member of the bar and compelling me to leave my sickbed and risk my health, I feel I have no choice but to report you to the Judicial Conduct Committee.”

“You’re free to do whatever you deem appropriate.”

“And since you now know that I will be reporting you to the JCC, I would ask you to recuse yourself from presiding further.”

“You can file your complaint, but that is not grounds to disqualify me from handling this case.”

Marvin rubbed the end of his glasses alongside his nose. “Judge, your refusal to step down only demonstrates the prejudice you hold against me and my client.”

I kept my hands in my lap, spinning my wedding ring, and took a deep breath. “I don’t intend to argue with you. Your motion to recuse me is denied.”

Unflappable as usual, Schwartz was two steps ahead of me. “Your honor, will you allow an interlocutory appeal?”

“No,” I said, “We’re right in the middle of trial.”

“Then, I would respectfully ask the court for the rest of this day and the weekend to file a writ of mandamus with the Supreme Court to have them order you off this trial.”

I gazed into Schwartz’s emotionless blue eyes. “That request is denied. You can file whatever you want on your own time. We’re going forward with this trial.”

“Judge, by denying my client’s access to the Supreme Court, you’re trampling on his constitutional rights.”

“Attorney Schwartz, your motions are denied. You’re not going to intimidate me into delaying this case for another minute.”

“In my opinion it is you who is trying to intimidate me,” Schwartz retorted, his voice having suddenly acquired a robust timbre.

* * *

I was returning to my chambers with my lunch when I saw LL leaning against the doorjamb, conversing with someone in my office. It was Jen, the last person I expected to see there. She hated coming to the courthouse. She had come down a few times after her accident, but was embarrassed when LL would announce “all rise” and she was the only one to remain seated. The court staff and bailiffs would fawn all over her, offering to push her wheelchair, to fetch something for her, and generally smothering her with pity.

She smiled shyly at my surprise.

“Where’s Brittany?” I blurted out.

A small folded quilt rested on her lap under her canvas tote bag. “One of her friends called, and I drove her over so she could play. I’m picking her up at four.”

I leaned down to peck her cheek. When I stood back up, LL turned to leave.

“See you later, Jen.”

“Bye, LL.”

I sat down in a chair next to her as she unfolded a handmade baby’s quilt. “Don’t you love it?”

It was adorable. Brightly stitched jungle animals occupied squares of primary colors. But right then a baby’s quilt provoked all sorts of discomfoting thoughts. Jen’s happy smile melted as she waited for my response. Finally, I stammered, “It...it’s gorgeous. Where’d you get it?”

“At the arts and crafts fair in Prescott Park. I saw it and just had to have it.”

“Great,” I said and changed the subject. “Want to go down to the cafeteria for lunch?”

Jen dipped her head and peeked up bashfully. “This is our last day this month, and with last night and all we haven’t tried for two days.” As she spoke, Jen surveyed my office, scouting out, I was certain, a suitable spot for coitus.

“Not here in my chambers!” I spluttered.

She eyed the open door, smiling. “Well, I’d want to close the door.”

A judge’s chambers, the office of the most powerful person in the courthouse, affords less privacy than a bench in the courthouse lobby. I had long since given up trying to close my door. Margaret Grootemaart would knock once, open the door, and tiptoe in. Ralph Beaudoin, clerk of court, would enter, sit down, and wait for me to finish whatever I was doing.

Rockingham County’s Supervisory Judge, Peter Gigas, would stand at the door and look

impatient if I didn't immediately acknowledge his presence. Law clerks would slink along the wall, motioning at the bookcase. And as far as LL was concerned, we shared an office.

"People walk in here all the time," I said. "whether that door is closed or not."

"We could lock it," she said hopefully.

I swung my head at her audacity. "We might as well put a sign on it, 'When these chambers are a rockin', don't come a knockin'.'"

Jen spoke again, her words tinged with genuine disappointment. "I thought maybe our baby's quilt would inspire you. And look what else I got." Out her canvas boat bag she lifted a health store bottle of walnut oil and, spinning off its cap, held it out for me to sniff. "Here, you can barely smell it."

"Jen," I pleaded. "When I get home."

"That'll be too late, and Brittany will be there," she insisted firmly. "Don't you want a baby?"

"Of course I do, honey" — I spread my arms out— "but here?"

She smiled seductively. "If you don't want to do it here, why don't you come home? You'll be back by two-thirty at the latest."

"I can't do that," I protested.

"Well that leaves only one option."

"Oh Jesus, no," I groaned futilely.

"Your car or mine?"

* * *

An hour later Jen and I returned to the courthouse. I dropped her off at her Toyota RAV4, and she drove home, convinced that making love in the backseat of a car would, as it

had for millions of teenagers, guarantee conception. LL greeted me at my chambers' door, nose uplifted, sniffing. His eyes, normally steely in their intensity, sparkled with mirth.

“The pasta, was it good?” he said, his lewd smirk dissolving into giggles.

“Haven't you got anything better to do?”

“Just think, conceived in the middle of a court recess. You can name the kid ‘Justice.’ ”

“How about I call you ‘Fired.’ ”

Saturday

Saturday morning I was drinking a second cup of coffee and reading the Coastal Courier on the patio while Jen hummed through some chores. Officer Clay had called the previous evening, right before he started his shift, to report that the police had no leads on our burglar. I still hadn't reported Brittany's tale of near abduction, and explaining that lapse to her parents still nagged at me.

The thought of going horseback riding at Bartholow Farm with Brittany began to percolate. The more I considered it, the better the idea sounded. She could show me where she claimed to have been attacked, and I could see if there was any evidence: footprints of a man running, hoof prints of a horse rearing, cigarette butts behind a boulder. If there were some corroboration of Brittany's story, I wouldn't have any misgivings about informing the police. On the other hand, if she were uncertain where it happened or unclear about some of the details, I would feel less guilty about not reporting it. It also gave me an out with my brother. I could explain that as a judge I was hesitant to report such a questionable crime—just a little white lie—and dump the whole mess into his hands when he returned.

By the time I rose from a lawn chair the idea was fully formed. In our bedroom dressing, I pitched my idea to Jen. "I'll have Brittany show me where it happened. Maybe there's some scuffed ground or tracks of some sort. And if there's nothing there, Brittany might very well admit that nothing really happened."

"She already told you what happened."

"Don't get me wrong, I believe her too. But before I call Portsmouth P.D. and stir up a hornet's nest, it might be worthwhile to investigate first—just a little."

Jen shrugged as if to say, "Do what you want," and wheeled out into the hall toward the living room.

Half awake, cuddling her stuffed horse Mistral, Brittany was still in bed. Her eyes opened the second I entered the room. With olive skin and jet-black hair, my first and only godchild looked just like a Parisi.

“Brittany,” I said, “how would you like to take your Uncle Tony riding?”

She sat up wide-awake. “Really? I can ride Aero Dynamique. She’s a Hanoverian. Have you ever seen a Hanoverian? Maybe they’ll let you ride...”

I called Bartholow Farm. It took a connection to the indoor riding ring and a few minutes, but I got Jason Klingman on the line. Perhaps to compensate for Bartholow Farms’ earlier misgivings about Brittany’s story, he couldn’t have been more accommodating.

“Have you ridden before?” he asked.

“Some,” I answered truthfully, but without elaboration. Describing my childhood experiences on the back of Angel, the draft mare that had pulled my grandfather’s fish wagon, would probably not have impressed him.

Klingman apparently had a sixth sense about riding ability. “We’ll fix you up with a nice, easy-riding horse, Judge.”

Forty-five minutes later Brittany had finished breakfast and we were ready to leave. Brittany, dressed in her riding garb, picked up her knapsack and we were out the door.

* * *

Bartholow Farms looked as perfect as a picture off a calendar, white fences bordering green pastures, the Atlantic extending to a blue sky dotted with clean clouds. We pulled up in front of the indoor riding ring. In the adjoining paddock a colt frolicked as its mother watched. Barn swallows dove and swooped.

Tethered to a section of fence, two horses loitered. Brittany went immediately to one and offered her a carrot. Aero Dynamique, I assumed. The other horse pushed in to see if there was a carrot for him. Reaching into her brown paper bag, Brittany obliged him with one too.

Klingman, dressed like a Calvin Klein model, emerged from the riding ring. While hugging Brittany, he pointed to the office where I had to pay, and said he'd have Brittany and one of the stable girls saddle our horses. "Brittany can show you some of the easier trails."

Bartholow Farms didn't take American Express, but they did take VISA...and how. All I wanted was to ride a horse for a couple of hours, not make a down payment on one. I knew Sal was doing well, but it must have been a lot better than I had imagined if he could afford those prices.

When I returned, the horses had been saddled. Brittany easily mounted Aero Dynamique, who snorted and stamped as if she couldn't wait to get going. My noble steed exhibited considerably more restraint. A high school girl waited to launch me. My mount, apparently also possessing a sixth sense about prospective riders, eyed me warily. I stroked his neck and whispered inane sentiments that I hoped might impress him, if not with my horsemanship, at least with my pleasant nature. "Nice horsey. What a pretty horsey. Good horsey." None of which appeared to soften his gimlet-eyed expression. Nonetheless, he did allow me to climb up on him.

Brittany led us toward the Atlantic, down a grass road separating two fenced in pastures. At a forest of leafy oaks and maples the road narrowed and winded through the woods. After we had been in the cooler shade for a few minutes, Brittany chattered away about the different horses she had ridden and their characteristics. After crossing a one-lane wooden bridge that traversed a steep ravine, we emerged from the woods onto a large irregular meadow.

I asked her about the attack. “Brittany, where was it exactly that the man tried to grab you?”

“On the Stable Loop,” she answered without hesitation.

“Would you mind showing me where?” She glanced over questioningly. “So I can tell your parents I’ve seen it,” I explained.

“Okay,” she answered, reining Aero Dynamique around and heading inland toward the farm. We rode along the fences of Bartholow Farms back toward the stables and barns. A couple of pastured horses sidled over to visit. The main house, pristinely white and perched on a rise about half a mile away, idly observed our progress until we came to a woods road that veered off away from the house. Pine needles scented the dry air and muffled the horses’ steps. It seemed a long way from the farm to let an nine year old ride alone, but what did I know.

“We’re close,” Brittany said, nervously looking around to make sure I was near by.

Why was I putting her through this I wondered? Why had I doubted her? I could see her little body stiffen with the tension. Even her horse seemed to sense it and began walking gingerly. Noisily a grouse charged out of the underbrush, scaring us more than we startled it. Around the next curve, Brittany whispered, “Right here.” The shrubs alongside the trail were particularly heavy, easily thick enough to conceal a man.

I rode up next to her. “Which way did he come from?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see him until Aero reared up.” Brittany looked around apprehensively.

“We’ll go back in a second, Brittany.”

I dismounted and examined the ground up and down the trail. Although horses’ hooves had chopped up the floor of the trail, making it soft enough to show the imprint of a human foot, there were none that I could see. Either the number of horses coming through in the past

few days had obliterated any footprints or there weren't any in the first place. I also couldn't find any evidence of a horse rearing up, although I wasn't sure what the marks would have looked like anyhow. Like an Indian scout in an old movie, I began to search for broken branches and twigs or any other evidence along the trail. I couldn't find a thing, but then again I was an Italian grocer's son not some frontiersman.

As I walked back to where Brittany waited quietly, holding the reins to my horse, a movement farther behind us on the trail caught my eye. A white hoof twitched beneath an overhanging shrub at a turn in the trail. The rest of the horse and rider were hidden. Another rider coming our way, I thought and mounted my horse, which had swung around to face where the other rider was coming from.

"Brittany, let's go a little further and then back to the farm. How's that sound to you?"

"Good."

I pulled on the rein to reverse my trusty steed's direction when I noticed that the approaching rider hadn't yet made the corner. As we reached the next bend in the trail, I looked back. Sitting on a big dappled gray, Jason Klingman was slowly walking our direction. I caught his eye.

"Hello judge. Hi Brittany."

"Hi," I replied.

"Mr. Klingman," Brittany squealed.

Urging his horse into a different gear, he trotted up next to us. "Hi Brittany. Where are you going?"

"No place."

"Mind if I join you?"

“Oh yes,” Brittany answered. “Look Mr. Klingman.” Brittany and Aero Dynamique began a formalized high-step trot that she had shown me earlier.

“Nice,” Klingman praised. “Taller—” Brittany stiffened her back and brought her shoulders back “—lighter hands, that’s it, nice...nice...very good.”

Brittany smiled proudly and happily. The three of us rode a little ways away from the farm, and Brittany, pleased by Klingman’s special attention and presence, chattered away, talking of this and showing him that. Klingman, for his part, seemed to enjoy her adoration and continued to coach and praise her.

The woods petered out, and we came to an untended meadow dotted with low juniper bushes, where we turned around and began riding back to the Farm, Brittany and Klingman in front and me behind. When we reached the spot on the trail where Brittany had said she had been attacked, her earlier timidity had disappeared.

“This is where that bad man tried to grab me,” she announced to Klingman. “Uncle Tony wanted to see where it happened.”

Twisting around slightly in his saddle, Klingman looked back at me.

“I was curious if there was anything out here,” I explained. His inquisitive expression remained. “I didn’t find anything.”

A thin superior smile stole across Klingman’s lips, his expression clearly conveying that Bartholow Farms had been correct that Brittany’s story was nothing more than an attempt to impress the other kids back at the barn. His reaction irritated me, but I had to admit my doubts outweighed my belief in my godchild.

Brittany was expected to put away the saddles and groom the horses. While she did that, I wandered around the compound of stables, paddocks, and barns. On a large dirt oval behind the barns a half dozen Thoroughbreds were being timed. A knot of people gathered by

the fence to watch. I walked down the slight incline to observe as well. At the edge of the group, more intent on the horses than the schmoozing, was Mac O'Farrell. He held a clipboard and stopwatch. A horse pounded by, and O'Farrell checked his watch and noted the time. A couple of the others did the same.

Noticing me, he asked, "How's that little girl of yours?"

"Brittany's my niece, but she's better, thanks." I reached out my hand and reminded him of my name. "I'm Tony Paris."

He said he remembered me, but I wasn't certain. I took up a position next to him on the rail as another horse thundered by, throwing up clumps of dirt. Looking at his stopwatch, O'Farrell muttered a positive sounding "Hmm," and wrote on his clipboard.

A groom whistled at the far end of the track. O'Farrell clicked his stopwatch as the horse and exercise girl rocketed off. Everyone watched with rapt attention. The Thoroughbred sprinted to gain speed and then stretched out as she cruised around the track. As she flew past us, O'Farrell stopped his watch. Shaking his head ever so slightly, he clucked his disappointment and said to the others. "That filly's not like her dad."

The horse, dull brown with a blocky neck and thick hindquarters, had turned around and was walking back past us. The exercise girl, big, with a horsey-looking face, petted the filly's neck and said to the group, "She simply won't finish. Starts fine and then sags."

To me, O'Farrell said, "One of Mistral's get."

"Get?"

"Progeny, offspring. A real disappointment. She looked like a promisin' filly."

We grew quiet. Elbows resting on the top railing, we leaned against it, silently surveying the horses sprinkled through the pastures beyond the track. A zephyr swept through the paddocks perfumed with the smells of hay and earth and horse. There was nothing awkward

about our silence. I was beginning to gain some appreciation for why people choose to waste their lives hanging around horses and stables.

Sunday

“Tell them I have a migraine.”

Jen and I sat at the table in the family room. Various sections of the Sunday Coastal Courier were spread around the table. I had appropriated the sports section (the Red Sox had lost again) and funnies. Jen was immersed in the coastal news section. Brittany still slept.

“You’ve never had a migraine in your life.” I chuckled at her desperation.

“I don’t know why you had to blab to every member in your family that we were trying to have a baby.”

“I told them we *wanted* to have a baby. Not that we were trying. And, may I remind you that I was not the one who told your mother and sister.”

“Yeah, but at least in my family baby-making’s not a competitive sport. And in case you’re not keeping score, we’re way behind.”

Jen was right about the score. Nonie, my mother, reigned over a brood of seven children and eleven grandchildren, with another on the way. “Jen, you want a baby; I want a baby, but this whole business is driving you over the edge. My family expects to see Brittany, especially with her parents away. We haven’t been in months.”

“Aargh,” she moaned. “Do you have any idea what it’s like for me? —” I had heard variations on this theme before “—I mean Nonie thinks this is God’s punishment because we didn’t get married in the Catholic Church.”

“Okay, okay.”

“And Lucy (my youngest sister, Luisa) will be waddling around like’s she’s going to have triplets, spouting trite bullshit like, ‘Oh Jen, keep trying. The whole experience is so fulfilling. It’s like you weren’t even complete before, but never realized it.’”

I winced to think that Lucy could say something that thoughtless to Jen, who, because of her paraplegia, already had exquisite feelings of inadequacy. “If you don’t go,” I said, “I’ll be the one who will have to listen to all that stuff. If we both go, we can share the load.” Seemed fair to me.

“It’s your family,” Jen retorted, but at least she was smiling.

Rubbing her eyes, holding her stuffed horse, Brittany shuffled into the living room. I smirked back at Jen, happy that Brittany’s appearance had put an end to her venting. I knew, and she did too, that we would go to church.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” Jen said.

Brittany winsomely half-smiled and Jen rolled away to get her breakfast.

* * *

Nonie was waiting for us—first pew, aisle seat—a tiny, dark-haired, Italian matriarch. As soon as she spotted us entering church, she waved us down front, the last place either of us wanted to be. Jen would have to sit in front of the first pew, where she would stick out like a sore thumb. Still, obediently, like a little boy in short pants, I joined the rest of my family already gathered around my mother. Brittany ran ahead to sit with her cousins, seated in the third pew. Loyally Jen rolled down the aisle behind me, drawing the attention of every person in church. Draped over her wheelchair, cushioning her back was the baby quilt, folded so that the brightly colored animals were hidden inside. Nonie slid over, giving me the aisle seat, my dead father’s place, the seat of honor. She motioned for Jen to park her wheelchair in front of us. Her face flushing slightly, her lips tight, Jen took up her assigned position.

My mother leaned forward and exchanged kisses with Jen. “Everyone is here,” Nonie declared too loudly for comfort. Her ancient face beamed with pride, and her dark eyes, without

an old person's cloudiness, gleamed. She held my hand as she talked to a nephew on the other side of her. In a few minutes the organ prelude stopped while the organist flipped through his sheet music to find the entrance hymn. Taking advantage of the silence, my mother leaned forward and, grabbing Jen's hand, pressed a wrinkled five-dollar bill into it. With her other hand, she gestured at the side altar, its steps ablaze with votive candles. Since Nonie no longer knew how to whisper, everyone within twenty feet overheard her. "Before you leave, light a candle and say a prayer to Saint Anthony. He's our patron saint of lost things and barren women."

The Catholic Church has a cruel sense of humor.

Jen looked stunned, neither taking the money nor rejecting it. Nonie continued stuffing the bill into Jen's unbelieving fingers. "Saint Anthony has helped many women like you. And he's Tony's patron saint." She smiled lovingly at me.

And the service hadn't even started. Later, at the end of Father LaPierre's general intercessions, he invited the congregation to offer their own petitions. A few of the devout muttered prayers aloud. "For my daughter who is driving back to New York this afternoon" and "For Agnes who is having surgery on Wednesday." Then Nonie, grasping Jen's shoulder and staring prayerfully down at her, offered her own supplication. "For a special intention, we pray to the Lord." When my mother prayed, she shouted to a God who was obviously as deaf as her. Her prayer reverberated throughout the church.

"Hear our prayer," the parishioners rejoined.

There was no missing the meaning of my mother's special intention. Although later it occurred to me that strangers might have assumed my mother was praying that Jen would miraculously, right there, jump up from her wheelchair and walk. Either way, the back of Jen's neck turned as crimson as the carpet. Mortified, I couldn't even imagine what Jen was feeling. I

wanted to touch her, to comfort her, but didn't dare, knowing that she'd think that everyone would see it as just another sign of pity.

We didn't go to my mother's for lunch. By the end of mass, a migraine suddenly struck Jen. Brittany went with her Aunt Lucy, who would return her later. As soon as the car turned the corner, Jen began weeping.

Monday

When Brittany and I stopped to pick up LL, Widow Buehler came to the bay window and shrugged that she didn't know where he was. His Cadillac was gone too. I waved "thank you" and backed out onto the street.

From the backseat Brittany asked, "Isn't he going to work today?"

"I don't know, honey," I answered. The only thing that would keep LL from a free ride and free newspaper was a woman.

I dropped Brittany off at Bartholow Farms and drove to the courthouse. LL had moored his royal blue Cadillac at the far end of the court employee's lot, all by itself.

"Why do you park way out there?" I had once asked.

"So some fucking idiot won't slam his door against the paint job."

A smart aleck in maintenance had painted the letters "LL" in the middle of that distant spot. It never occurred to LL that it was a joke, that no one would want a reserved parking space in the farthest reach of the lot. But he considered it a badge of his importance that he had his own personally assigned parking space exactly where he liked to park.

In my chambers LL sat in his customary chair, reading a borrowed Boston Herald, and acting as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

"Nice of you to call," I said.

"I was occupied," he responded, a glint in his eyes.

"I'm sure." I started flipping through the day's files on my desk. LL went sad-eyed and perplexed, a dog that's fetched the ball and can't understand why his master won't throw it again. Eventually I relented. "Okay, I'll bite. How was your weekend?"

LL's face lit up, but then switched to a look of solemnity. "Real men don't answer questions like that."

“True, but sooner or later you will, and I’ve got a busy day, so why don’t you tell me all about it now.”

“She’s thirty-one,” LL bragged. “Young enough to be my daughter.”

“I can do the math.”

LL stared dreamily off into the distance. “Less than fifteen percent body fat, and it’s all packaged right where you want it. Did you know they can do that?”

“What? Distribute body fat where you want it?”

“No,” LL answered. “Measure the percent of your weight that’s body fat. They weigh you in water!”

“Who is she anyhow?”

“An Irish school teacher over here for the summer. She’s working at a fish joint in Hampton Beach.”

“How did you meet her?”

LL flashed a sly sideways grin. “Promise you won’t laugh?”

“No.”

“At Seacoast Health and Fitness.”

“A health club! You’ve never stepped foot in one.”

“That was true until I found out how many women go to these places. Every night after work, there are dozens of them, all in skintight Lycra, as if they were on display in a candy store.”

LL’s reasons for going to a health club didn’t surprise me at all, but that he might get sweaty in the interest of fitness flabbergasted me. “You actually work out.” Then again, I realized he hadn’t been perspiring to build up his cardiovascular system, he was doing it to get laid.

“Oh yeah! I feel great afterward.”

“I’m sure,” I said, thinking about another form of exercise. I loved imagining him lumbering around a health studio sipping spring water. “Which do you do? Water aerobics or the step class?”

“No, I circle through a couple of reps on the Nautilus, and the nights Rosemary leads the aerobics class, I join her.”

I couldn’t stop myself from chuckling.

“Go ahead, keep laughing.” LL knew it was amusing, but although he had no problem poking fun at someone else, he was less happy when the tables were turned.

But I couldn’t stop, imagining LL cavorting around Seacoast Health and Fitness in nylon shorts and a tee shirt.

* * *

At the luncheon recess there was a message on my desk in Margaret’s handwriting. “Call your wife. Emergency.” Jen’s call had been received at eleven-ten, an hour and twenty minutes earlier. Great, I thought, seriously contemplating going downstairs and wringing Margaret’s scrawny neck before I returned the phone call.

Jen picked up on the first ring. “Brittany fell off her horse.” Her voice thickened as she choked back the sobs. “She doesn’t have any feelings in her legs.”

“Where are you?”

“Portsmouth Hospital.”

“I’ll be right there.”

My mind, bouncing between overwhelming panic and more controlled concern, raced as fast as the car. My chief worry was Brittany, but close behind were her parents. I wondered if anyone had called them. And Jen. How was she was handling it?

It sure brought back some awful memories for me. Six months into our marriage, while I had been playing hooky from my modest criminal law practice, she had been working on an old colonial that we were restoring in the historic part of Portsmouth and had fallen from a ladder. When I returned from fishing, the love of my life laid on the hall floor, paralyzed. Typical Jen, the first words out of her mouth were, “Tony, it’s not your fault.” But I have always felt that I should have been the one on that ladder.

By the time I arrived, there were already plenty of other relatives in the waiting room. One look at them was enough to know it was serious. Worry had shaken their faces blank, draining them of emotion. Lucy, holding hands with one child and balancing the other on top of her swollen belly, sat with Jen. My wife looked like a frightened animal, her red-rimmed eyes so loaded up with adrenalin that they appeared as if they might pop. For once Lucy didn’t try to give advice or take control of the crisis. She just held Jen’s hand, as more and more Parisis arrived at the hospital.

I didn’t lean down to kiss Jen, fearful that I might break down as well. Too oblivious to even mind, Jen held my proffered hand as if she, Lucy, my niece Sable, and I were in our own little prayer circle. My brother Paul, as the oldest, was in with Brittany.

“Has anyone called Sal and Barbara?” I asked.

Lucy answered. “We’ve tried, but they’re not at the hotel listed on their itinerary. Roseanne’s calling everyplace she can think of.”

Standing off by himself was Jason Klingman, Brittany’s riding instructor. Seeing a familiar face, he came directly over, and I left Jen’s side to find out what happened.

“Judge Paris,” he said, extending his arm to shake hands. He wore a cream-colored, Scarlet Pimpernel shirt, and his distress was palpable. “I am so sorry about Brittany. We all are. I don’t know what to say. I was right there. She was riding along fine, cantering, when her horse stumbled.” He continued to pump my hand, glad for the chance to expiate his guilt. “I’m just praying she’s all right.”

“We all are. Any idea what happened?” I asked.

“She was in the outdoor riding ring. Everything seemed okay when her horse, Aero Dynamique—you remember her, the one she rode Saturday morning—tripped, and Brittany flew right over his neck and onto her head. She panicked and wouldn’t let go of the reins. Aero spooked and started rearing and flailing. And before she let go, the horse kicked her on the head. It was horrible.”

“I can imagine.”

“I really didn’t want to intrude.” He motioned at all of Brittany’s gathered relatives. “Would you call to let me know how she is, or if there is anything we can do?”

“Sure,” I said.

He handed me a tasteful business card with a watermark of several horses in the mist. “I’ll be off now.” He had walked a few feet away when he turned. “We loved that little girl.”

His use of the past tense seemed odd and raised my anxiety to a whole new level. “A lot of people do,” I replied, motioning at my family.

Paul was shuttling questions and answers between the emergency room and us. Apparently Brittany had been knocked out cold and then in the ambulance regained consciousness for a while. As Paul reiterated what he had learned, he hesitated. “Apparently she was conscious long enough for them to confirm that she has no feeling from the waist down.”

Jen uttered a primal moan and, spinning her wheelchair around, rolled out of the room.

Paul was so distraught he barely noticed. “She’s unconscious again, and they say that’s not a good sign.”

Nonie dropped her head into her hands and started praying. My brother Frank put an arm around her and tried to comfort her. Everyone else began crying and murmuring to one another. I glanced to see where Jen had gone, but she was out of sight. I decided to give her some time alone and stayed with my family.

Before going back to the emergency room Paul spoke again. “This is not a final prognosis everyone. The doctor says it’s not uncommon for a broken neck to result in initial paralysis, but that some feelings and sensations often come back.”

We all mingled and commiserated. Roseanne arrived and reported that she still hadn’t been able to locate Sal and Barbara, but that she’d found their travel agent who was going to keep trying. Ten minutes later Paul returned to the waiting room. “They’re transferring her to Mass General,” he whispered.

“Oh my God,” Nonie exclaimed, running her fingers over her Rosary beads even faster.

“Why?” Lucy asked, grasping her bulging stomach as if protecting her unborn.

Paul started to answer. “Her brain is swelling...” But he couldn’t finish and, sobbing, slumped into an empty chair. He wiped his eyes and blew his nose and then continued to softly cry. I had been holding back, but seeing my older brother weep drew the tears from my eyes. Everyone began to cry.

Jen returned, her face splotchy. I had asked if she was all right. Too overcome to speak, she nodded, “yes.”

A nurse came out to get Paul. “They’re leaving shortly,” she said. Paul rose and mindlessly plodded toward the emergency room like a prisoner walking to his execution.

“What exactly is the matter?” Frank asked her.

The nurse answered, “She’s suffered a subdural hematoma to the brain. It looks as if the horse kicked her, and blood from the blow is filling her cranial cavities, pressing on her brain. She has to be operated on in order to relieve the pressure.”

“Can it cause permanent injury?” Frank asked.

“We won’t know. She also broke her neck, which will have to be operated on. She’s on medication, and her neck is stabilized. The good news is that all her vital signs are strong. She’s a healthy young girl and will hopefully come through this just fine.” The nurse’s voice trailed off and her optimism sounded obligatory and not at all hopeful.

Nonie moaned and went back to her beads. We began deciding who would be going to Boston, who would ride with whom, and who would take care of the children. It all brought back too many memories for Jen, and she elected to return home, assuring me that she’d be fine and that I should be with my godchild.

* * *

It was nearly eleven when I was finally able to call Jen.

She was asleep but came wide awake the second she heard me. “How is she?”

“Not great. They had to drill holes in her skull to relieve the pressure. Tomorrow or Wednesday, when some of the swelling has gone down, they’re going to operate on her neck. They let me see her before I left.” I started to choke up and the words gurgled in my throat. “She’s got more wires and IVs than Frankenstein. She’s still unconscious, but she looks so peaceful, so innocent. Nonie keeps wondering what we did to deserve this, which of course is nonsense, but when you see her there in that room, you have to wonder, if there is a God, how He could let this happen.”

“I should have come with you.”

“No, there’s nothing you could have done. My God, half the family is down here as it is. I think they’re going to start giving us updates in the auditorium.”

Jen’s gentle laughter was music to my ears right about then. “What about Sal and Barbara?” she asked.

“They’re on their way to Rome, trying to book a flight.”

“Thank goodness for that, at least. Where are you staying?”

“The Casa Monte Cassino. A Catholic parish here in the North End operates it. The social service lady saw the name Parisi, took one look at us, and said, ‘I know the perfect place for you to stay.’ It’s mainly for pediatric families from overseas, especially Italy, but they had the room and took us. It’s really cute. Nonie spent most of the evening talking Italian with one of the ladies from the church.”

There was a momentary silence before Jen asked, “Are you feeling guilty about what happened?”

“Are you kidding,” I whispered back.

“Me too. I just pray she isn’t paralyzed. Your family has never figured it out. They either see it as a character flaw, or they ignore it like it’s really not there. It’s hard for me to picture how your family is going to handle an nine year old paralyzed girl.”

It was hard to defend my family when not one of them had made his or her home wheelchair accessible. And now wasn’t the time to come to their support. “Actually, right now they seem a lot more concerned about brain damage. The swelling inside the skull presses on sections of the brain, which slows or cuts off blood flow to that area. It can cause permanent cognitive dysfunction. And apparently infection is a huge risk. They’re pouring antibiotics into her.”

“When will they know?”

“Not for a while.”

Tuesday

I arrived at the hospital in time for the Catholic chaplain's eight o'clock mass. The Parisi family filled the hospital chapel; there may have been only two or three other worshipers. Nonie believed that the number of intercessions we offered was directly proportional to Brittany's chances of recovery, and we all made special intentions and lit candles at Mary's side altar. After mass we trooped back to the waiting room, where we took turns asking the nurses and doctors for updates.

Brittany was still unconscious and in intensive care. The burr holes had reduced the swelling in her head, but her neck was still too swollen to operate and the surgeons were waiting until Wednesday. During the course of the afternoon, in small groups, we were allowed to look into her hospital room. If you could block out all the IV's and machines she was hooked up to, she looked like she was taking an afternoon nap.

* * *

I left the hospital in the late afternoon, after one last peek at Brittany. Her parents were expected early the next morning, and there was really nothing more I could do for her. Plus, I hadn't shaved or changed my clothes for two days.

I didn't arrive home until six-thirty, and we immediately ordered a pizza. Preoccupied with Brittany, I was in the family room, waiting for the delivery boy, watching nothing in particular. Jen rolled up next to me, carrying a beer mug for me and a lime seltzer for her.

I touched her glass with my mug. "I love you," I said, acutely aware of how fortunate I was.

"Me too. All of this makes you realize what's precious."

“I sure don’t envy Sal or Barbara right now. I’d love to have a baby, but, boy, the world is a real dicey place.”

“I know,” Jen said, “But for some reason, and I can’t understand why, I still feel this intense urge to have a baby, our baby. Every time I think of Brittany, my obsessiveness about conceiving seems so selfish. Especially at a time like this when Sal and Barbara are worried about a real child, a beautiful little girl.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself. What they’re going through doesn’t minimize your pain.”

“They’re struggling with reality. I’m still dreaming.”

“It’ll happen. One way or another, we’ll get a child. In fact, I’ve been thinking about where we go from here...” I stopped, deciding this was not the time to bring up adoption.

Wednesday

Although my heart wasn't in it, I went back to work the next morning. Marvin Schwartz and Bill Powers, the county attorney, were all bent out of shape. Two of the State's witnesses had only been available to testify on Tuesday. One witness' absence was fatal to continuing the trial. The drug analyst was essential to the State to confirm what everyone connected with the case already knew was true: that the marijuana was marijuana. Although the three-quarters of a pound of dark green vegetative matter was found next to a set of scales, a stack of sandwich baggies, and four hundred and thirty dollars of American currency, Schwartz refused to permit the analyst's written report be admitted into evidence and insisted he testify live. It was a no-lose proposition for Marvin. If the analyst showed up and completed his testimony, Schwartz would stand up with a perplexed face, as if he couldn't understand why the prosecutor would squander the jury's time on such a trivial matter, and say, "I have no questions for this witness." Which, of course, would send Powers into orbit.

Hoping the analyst wouldn't show up was the real reason Schwartz insisted on his attendance, and he'd hit the jackpot. "Your honor, if the county attorney cannot prove that the substance is marijuana, there is no point in proceeding and wasting the jury's time, expending precious judicial resources (meaning my time), and unnecessarily spending my client's money. I move for dismissal."

"Your honor," Powers pleaded. "My expert will be back in the state next week. I only ask that I be allowed to have him testify then."

"I object," Schwartz interjected. "He can't call witnesses after the State's rested."

"It's only the drug analyst. It's purely pro forma," Powers responded.

"Stick to English, Bill," Marvin needed. "You're more comfortable with it."

I cut off Powers' retort. "That's enough. I agree with Marvin that calling the analyst out of turn wouldn't be proper. But my missing court yesterday was an unforeseen emergency. I'm declaring a mistrial. I'll let the jury know, and I'll have Ralph reschedule you in September."

Marvin dropped his glasses down onto his nose and jotted something on his pad. He let the half-glasses fall onto his chest, hanging by their cord. "Judge, I move to have the charge dismissed on the grounds of double jeopardy. It's unconstitutional to force my client to be tried a second time for the same offense. In support of my motion I would point the court to part one, article sixteen of our constitution and the Fifth Amendment to the United State's Constitution."

"I know the law, Attorney Schwartz. If you want to file a motion, go right ahead."

My citizen jury was overjoyed by the news that they were set free. One lumbering man with a black Harley-Davidson tee shirt, jeans, and a salt and pepper goatee even let out a loud whoop.

* * *

Sal had left a message to call him at Mass General. I knew I'd eventually have to talk to him. Although I could rationalize that Brittany's injuries weren't my fault, just like with Jen, I wore the guilt like it was an old sweater. I closed my chambers' door, took a deep breath, and dialed the number.

"Sal, I am so sorry. I'd give my life for Brittany. You know that. I feel absolutely terrible," I blurted out as soon as he came on the line.

"I know, I know. You don't need to punish yourself, Tony. It's not your fault."

"I still do," I sighed. After pausing a beat or two, I asked, "Are they operating today?"

"In a couple of hours."

“How’s she doing?”

“Not well. We arrived around six this morning and came right over. When she woke up, she didn’t know who we were or even where she was. It was awful to witness. She got real panicked, like a trapped animal.” Sal started to weep softly and then blew his nose. “She’s also having trouble talking. Before she says anything, there’s this long pause, as if she is searching for the word.”

I felt worse by the second. “Do they think it’s permanent?”

“There’s no way of telling right now. We have to wait.”

“This not knowing, having to wait, it’s killing me.”

“Me too, but we don’t have much choice.”

“I’m coming down this afternoon. I’m just a basket case hanging around up here.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to.”

“If you do come down, can I ask a favor?”

“Are you kidding? What?”

“This morning, once Brittany got oriented, she was real happy to see us, but the next thing she asked about was Mistral, her stuffed horse. Do you know where it is?”

“It’s probably still in her knapsack at Bartholow Farms.”

“It’s like her security blanket; she doesn’t go anyplace without it. And I’d like her to have it when she comes out of surgery.”

“I’m on my way,” I said, relieved and delighted to be able to do something to help.

* * *

With State versus Hernandez mistried, Ralph couldn't find much else for me to do that morning. I'd already told him I was going to Boston that afternoon, and at noon I left for Bartholow Farms.

After parking in the lot next to the indoor riding ring, I went into the meeting and lunchroom. A group of trainers and riding instructors congregated at one table, eating their lunches. I briefly explained my mission. Once they heard I was Brittany's uncle, they rose and, earnestly shaking my hand, asked about her condition. Then they sent me over to the tack store and office, underneath one of the bigger stables.

There I found Jason Klingman lounging on a trunk, chatting with another instructor. He jumped up. "Judge Paris."

"Nice to see you again," I greeted him.

"How's Brittany?"

I explained her operations and the cloudy prognosis. "Right now we all have our fingers crossed."

"I can't sleep worrying about her."

"A lot of us are losing sleep." The conversation lapsed for a beat until I asked, "Do you know where her knapsack is? She has a stuffed horse in it that is pretty precious to her." I added, "She named it after Mistral."

"She really loved that horse." He smiled sympathetically. "It's probably in the lost and found."

He led me back into the bowels of the stable and up a narrow, dark wooden staircase. Stable hands were cleaning stalls and grooms were brushing horses. In the tack room a floor to ceiling rack held a dozen saddles and blankets. Bridles and reins hung from hooks on the plank walls, and rough shelving held everything else, combs, curries, polish. A lost and found sign

hung above a built-in wooden storage box. Brittany's knapsack, with her helmet swinging from it, hung on a wooden peg.

"That's it," I said, pointing.

He pulled the knapsack and helmet down and handed them to me.

* * *

I reached Mass General at quarter to two. If anything, even more of my family was present, monopolizing the pediatric waiting room. Sal and Barbara looked like refugees, sunken eyes, ghostly skin, and drawn faces. I set down Brittany's knapsack and riding helmet to hug both of them.

"I am so sorry; I'm just heartsick," I said, still holding Barbara by the shoulders.

Her face mottled from crying, she thanked me and went to one knee to open the backpack and removed the stuffed version of Mistral. "As soon as she comes out, we'll give it to her. It'll be a real comfort for her."

A little before three the head surgeon came out to tell us that the operation had gone well. Brittany's cervical spine had been broken and crushed. "We fused two vertebrae and repaired as much as we could. She's had a serious insult to her spinal cord. At this point in time we don't how much feeling and sensation will return. But she's young and in good health. We'll hope for the best."

Behind me I could hear my mother's whispered prayers and pictured her ancient fingers caressing her beads.

"When can we see her?" Barbara asked.

“Not until this evening,” the doctor replied. “We thought it best to install a halo to hold everything in place and to minimize any risk of further injury. It will take them an hour or so to finish that. Then she’ll be in recovery. We’ll keep you posted.”

“Thank you,” we all said like submissive subjects, hoping our outpouring of gratitude would find favor with this modern day medicine man.

On one of the institutional gray settees, I sat next to Sal. Other than an occasional announcement by a family member that they were going to the restroom or the cafeteria, there was little talk. Sal and I had barely spoken, but then again there wasn’t much to converse about. I certainly wasn’t going to inquire how much he and Barbara enjoyed Italy.

On the floor between us was Brittany’s red backpack. Across the room Barbara held tightly to her stuffed horse. I was idly picking and pulling at the straps on the knapsack when I noticed that the plume of Mistral’s mane hair was gone from the helmet. Probably knocked off in the fall, I thought. A stray horsehair clung to the crown of the helmet, and I idly brushed it off, wondering if it might have come from the plume. There were several more sticking to the back of the knapsack, and I swept them onto the floor as well.

* * *

I didn’t get home until nine. Although Jen had some leftovers ready to microwave, I wasn’t hungry and collapsed onto the sofa with a beer and some popcorn. I passed along to Jen all that I knew and reported the cloudy prognosis.

“I think I may drive down to see her tomorrow,” she said, reaching into the bowl of popcorn.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “You don’t have to. There are enough Parisis at the hospital to populate a small *villagio*.”

Jen chuckled once. "I'm ready. Besides, if worse comes to worse, and she is paralyzed, I want to be there for her." She lifted a large book out of her canvas bag. It was an encyclopedia of horse breeds. "I got her this as a present."

"She'll love it," I said. "If you can wait until afternoon, I'll go with you. I can pick you up as soon as court ends and we can go out for dinner afterward."

"That'd be nice."

"You know that plume you made for Brittany?"

"Sure."

"It must have fallen off her helmet. I'm going to go back down to Bartholow's tomorrow before work to see if I can find it. Anything to brighten her corner."

Thursday

I called LL early the next morning to tell him that I would be swinging by Bartholow Farms before work to look for Brittany's plume of horsehair, and if he wanted a ride, I would be a half hour earlier than usual. It's a testament to his parsimony that he said, "okay." When I got to his apartment, he was ready to go and, even more surprising, kept his complaining to a minimum as we drove down the Shore Road to Bartholow Farms.

We went directly to the tack store and office. Jason Klingman wasn't around. Instead I met Stevie Holmes, the farm's manager, in person. Slim with sharp features and thinning hair cut to nearly a buzz, Holmes, like everyone else, knew Brittany and inquired anxiously about how she was.

I briefly filled him in on her operations and the prognosis.

I said, "This is a little embarrassing, but the morning Mistral died...Brittany took a few of his mane hairs."

"Um-hum," he acknowledged.

I held up my hands to demonstrate my innocence. "I didn't realize what she was doing until after it happened. Anyhow, those mane hairs became quite a memento for her. My wife even made a little plume out of them for her helmet." Holmes kept nodding. "Well, I picked up her helmet and knapsack yesterday, and the hair was gone. It probably got knocked off in her fall or afterward. I was wondering if we could take a look."

"Absolutely. The only problem is I don't know where she fell. Wasn't Jason Klingman her instructor?"

"Yeah."

"Stay here and let me see if I can locate him."

Wandering around examining the saddles and bridles, LL didn't say much, but his pickled expression told me all I wanted to know about how he actually felt about Stevie Holmes' sexual orientation.

A couple of minutes later, Jason showed up, his hand outstretched. "What can I do for you Judge?"

I related how Brittany had lost Mistral's hair in her fall. "You already know how infatuated she was with that horse, and now the plume is missing. I know it sounds silly, but I'd like to try to find it for her, something to cheer her up, and I thought maybe it might be someplace around here."

"We can go look," he offered.

He took us back to the lost and found, and threw up the homemade wooden cover of the storage box. "The plume could have slipped off and either fallen or been put in here."

The box was filled with sweaters, jackets, tee shirts, socks, and running shoes. While LL observed, Klingman, and I removed every article, pawing through them to see if the plume had attached itself to some sweatshirt or sock. Having finished there without finding anything, we followed him down the aisle and out through a small door to the back of the barn. Below us, down an embankment, was the outdoor riding arena.

Klingman motioned at it. "I'll show you where she fell."

The oval was about the size of a hockey rink, enclosed by white board fences. A small grandstand regarded it from the opposite side. Klingman slipped between the rails and walked to an area not far from the fence. "Right here." He kicked the fluffy mixture of sand and sawdust. "But I doubt you'll be able to find it. They rake this a couple of times a day."

Before leaving for his first lesson, Klingman fetched a couple of wood-tined rakes, and LL and I went to work, dressed in our court clothes. It was hot work and after fifteen minutes of fruitless searching, we had produced nothing other than some horse turds and perspiration.

Mac O'Farrell, the Irish trainer, leading a horse toward the exercise track, noticed us. Of course, we were hard to miss. Me in a suit and LL in his bailiff's uniform, raking sawdust and horseshit in a riding ring.

"Judge," he hollered, angling his horse our way. "How's that daughter of yours coming along?"

"Brittany's my niece," I reminded him again.

"Yes, of course," he said, approaching us. "What're you doing?"

Glad for the break, I walked a couple of steps toward him and rested against the white board fence. "Brittany had a plume of Mistral's mane hair on her helmet. She took it before I had a chance to stop her," I explained for what felt like the fourteenth time. "It fell off, and we're looking for it."

"Is she going to be all right?"

"We don't know yet. She was operated on yesterday. They installed one of those metal halos around her head."

O'Farrell clucked sympathetically. "You're not going to find anything in there." He circled the ring with his hand, sizing the area. "It'll be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"We're probably only search for a few minutes more." I returned to my raking.

He took a couple more steps, shaking his head with a mixture of mild amusement and bewilderment, and then turned to face us. "They took Mistral to the knacker's only last week." He spat the words out.

"Knacker?"

“True to course, these tup’enny bastards, sendin’ a horse like Mistral off to the knacker. Mother of God, it’s...it’s blasphemous. An animal like that should have a good and proper burial. Too cheap to buy an hour’s worth of a backhoe.” O’Farrell spat again. “I told the head fairy, Bartholow, that I’m done. Soon as I can find new a position, he’ll have me notice.”

“I didn’t mean to stir anything up.”

“Ah, it’s not your fault. “He tossed his head, trying to throw off the thought. “A champion like that taken to the knacker.”

“Exactly what is a knacker?”

“A knacker’ll dispose of an old horse or cow by selling the parts.”

“Really.”

“Sure. The meat is sold for dogfood, hides go to a tannery, bones ground up for meal, and hooves made into glue. I imagine some of the tail and probably the mane is still left. Not much use for them.”

“You think I should check?”

“Couldn’t hurt.” He smiled. “Course, the stench may kill you.”

“Do you know which knacker they took Mistral to?”

“Only one around here. Horrie Byam.”

Thanks,” I said.

“Here’s a little treasure,” LL said after O’Farrell was out of hearing, balancing a four-inch ball of horse turd in his rake. “How much more of this do you want to do?”

“I don’t think there’s any point in raking the whole ring, and we need to get to court.”

On our way back to the car, we met Klingman, leading a horse carrying a middle-aged woman toward the ring. “Any luck?”

“No,” I said. “We put the rakes back.”

“Thanks. Please tell Brittany how much all of us love her and miss her. She’s such a sweetheart.”

“Mac O’Farrell said that Mistral had been transported to Horrie Byam, a knacker?” I asked, uncertain what exactly I was talking about. “And that some of his mane and tail hairs might still be there?”

Klingman turned to face me squarely, as if to emphasize the point. “Mistral’s long gone by now.”

“Well, I don’t imagine it can hurt to check.”

“There’ll be nothing left,” he answered, his expression firmly fixed.

Nevertheless, I got directions to Horrie Byam’s one-man abattoir in North Berwick, Maine.

* * *

Silvery balloons floated everywhere in Brittany’s room. The sight of her wrapped a cold compress around my heart. A metal halo, bolted into her skull, encircled her shaved head, holding it stiffly erect. Tubes and wires sprouted from her, weaving among the flowers and balloons to monitors and screens. Her stuffed version of Mistral lay on the hospital bed next to her.

Despite her surroundings and injuries, Brittany broke into a smile the second she saw us. Her greeting, however, was delayed; her face screwing up as she concentrated to form her words. “Aunt Jen, Uncle Tony.”

Jen rolled up beside her, and since neither could get any closer, Jen kissed her fingers and touched them to Brittany’s lips, who kissed them back. From her canvas bag Jen drew the horse book she’d bought. Brittany’s dull eyes brightened and her mouth pursed as if to say

something, but again there was an unnerving hitch between thought and speaking. “Oh, thank you, Aunt Jen.”

I leaned down to kiss her, ducking under the shiny halo. “Do you get all your favorite stations?” I asked.

A grin burst forth and a second later she said, “Uncle Tony.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Jen said.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

Again there was that hesitation. “Fine, except I can’t talk so good.”

“Well,” Jen corrected her.

Brittany’s eyes peeked from their corners, and she repeated, “Well.”

While I watched, Jen opened the book next to Brittany and they began to page through it with Brittany supplying a halting commentary. About a dozen horses into the book, she pointed at her black riding helmet, hanging from a wall peg, and stammered in a childish pleading voice, “Aunt Jen, I lost Mistral’s hair.”

I didn’t say a word, reckoning that if I was able to replace the mane hairs, it would be a great surprise, and if I couldn’t, I didn’t want to get her hopes up. Jen said, “We can make another one.”

“But it won’t be Mistral’s,” Brittany whined.

Barbara touched Brittany’s hairless head, stroking it. “Aunt Jen will find something nicer for your helmet.”

Brittany’s expression signaled that she didn’t think so, but she and Jen went back to her horse book. While they flipped the pages, I furtively touched Brittany’s leg. Not feeling the contact she kept right on leafing through her new book with Jen. But Sal noticed my touch and with a tilt of his head motioned for me to go out into the hall.

With a dismayed shake of his head, he said, “Her feeling hasn’t returned yet. They keep saying don’t get discouraged, but it’s pretty hard.”

“I can’t imagine, Sal.”

“Well, you’ve been through some of this.”

“Yeah,” I replied, recollecting those long days and nights at the hospital, full of worry and guilt. “But it wasn’t my kid, and Jen was thirty-two, not nine.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m more worried about her head. The doctor says that it could be months before we get an accurate assessment of the degree of cognitive loss.”

“God, it seems so unfair,” I responded. “I can’t tell you how much we love that kid.”

Besides being my first and only godchild, Brittany had single-handedly returned me, like the prodigal son, to the family fold. I’d been thirty when she was born, and until her baptism almost no one in my family would have anything to do with me. In a weak moment, right before starting law school, I dropped the “i,” from Parisi, hoping a more glamorous name and a night school degree would catapult me into some fancy Boston law firm, which, of course, it hadn’t. My mother had been heartsick, but, after a childhood of Catholic compliance, it had been my only real act of rebellion. And as a badge of independence, I kept the name when I returned to Portsmouth. For nearly two years I wasn’t included in family events if my mother was going to be present. Then Sal and Barbara asked me to be their firstborn’s godfather, and I stood up before my family, looked them in the eye, and swore I would do everything in my power to protect Brittany from evil and harm. It didn’t erase their disappointment, but I was at least part of the family again.

“I know.” Sal’s eyes moistened and I wondered how he had any tears left. “It’s like she’s trying to keep up our spirits rather than the other way around.”

“Take it as a blessing,” I said, spouting feel-good aphorisms like my mother.

“Optimism has to help her healing.”

Sal swayed his head back and forth. “She thinks in a couple of weeks she’s going to get out of that bed and walk out of here, right back into her life as she left it.”

“She may.”

“I don’t think so, Tony.”

“Let’s hope and pray.”

* * *

It was still light when pediatric visiting hours ended, and we walked and rolled over the shoulder of Beacon Hill to Fanueil Hall for a late supper. At one curb I had to assist Jen and tilted her wheelchair back as she powered up and over the granite border. I noticed a hair clinging to the back of her shoulder. I picked it off. Too straight to be Jen’s, I decided, and the color wasn’t right, too dark. I flicked it on to the ground. A horsehair, I idly thought. Probably from Brittany’s stuffed horse.

It reminded me of the possibility that some of Mistral’s mane or tail hairs might still be at the knacker’s, and I mentioned my desire to mosey up there on Saturday to see. “Apparently, a knacker processes everything. That’s how they make their money. If this guy was planning to tan the hide, then there is a pretty good chance of finding some more hair for Brittany.”

“I think I’d like to go. Maybe I could make an article out of it. ‘Dying Occupation.’ How’s that sound?”

“Great double entendre,” I answered. “Are you sure everyone will get it.”

Friday

The next morning I was dressed, ready for work, and watching the morning news when Jen appeared in the family room. Her face was splotchy and her eyes raw. Pointing at my coffee mug, she said bitterly, “Would you get me a cup?” and then burst into tears. Her sobbing shredded her words, but I didn’t have to understand them to know that her period had come. She pounded the tops of her legs, hitting them as if they were some despised enemy.

Leaning down, I placed her arms around my neck and hugged her tightly. She buried her head into my chest, still sobbing. I stroked her back and finger-combed her hair, while mumbling meaningless nonsense. “Don’t worry,” “It’ll be alright, honey,” “I love you.” *I didn’t want a kid if we had to keep going through this. It wasn’t worth it.* I pulled her up and out of the wheelchair and set her gently onto the sofa. I pressed her head against my shoulders, and she went as a limp as a rag doll.

“I can’t go on like this. I can’t. I’d rather be dead.”

“Don’t say that.”

Eventually all the tears and sobbing were wrung out of her, and she rested passively in my arms.

“I’ll call in sick,” I offered.

“No, I’ll be all right.” She swung herself into her wheelchair and rolled down the hallway.

Before leaving, I went down to our bedroom. Jen was lying on her back, staring vacantly at the ceiling as tears streamed down her cheeks wetting the ends of her hair and the pillow. I leaned down to kiss her and tasted salty tears.

“I wish there was something I could do.”

“There’s nothing you can do. It’s my problem, and like every other shitty thing, I have to learn to live with it.”

Jen rolled away from me without kissing me goodbye.

* * *

LL’s country-and-western station couldn’t drown out the lingering sound of Jen’s crying. I ached inside for her. Maybe I had been right in the beginning, that having children wasn’t for us. And maybe by yielding to Jen’s wishes, I had only created more heartache for her, and us. I knew Jen was obsessed with having our own child, but this was nuts. And the process was killing us both. The solution had to be adoption. I made a mental note to see Skye Wheeler, the probate court judge. She would probably know a reputable adoption agency.

As insensitive as LL could be, even he noticed that I was out of sorts. About halfway to court, he put down my newspaper. “You all right?”

“Yeah.”

“Jen?”

“Her period came this morning.” He knew the rest. I didn’t have to say anymore.

“Oh shit,” he said, folding his lips in on one another.

“This conception crap is just eating her up.”

* * *

That afternoon when I got home, Jen didn’t hear me come in. She was in the bedroom, vacuuming. In a Calvinist frenzy, she had decided to spring-clean our bedroom and had pulled the bureaus and our stripped bed away from the walls and into the center of the room. When I entered, she turned the vacuum off.

“I would have done this,” I protested.

“I can’t do anything,” she said, tossing the wand and hose into the corner. “I can’t have a baby. I can’t do my job. I can’t even keep the house clean.” She circled her hand at the surrounding bureaus.

“To be honest, Jen, your furniture-moving skills were not exactly the primary reason I married you.”

She shifted her head slightly, and a thin grin made its way across her weary face.

I continued, “But if this is really the way you want the furniture arranged, it’s fine by me. Really.”

The corners of her mouth lifted a little higher.

“I mean it’s perfect for you, and so convenient for me. We don’t have to leave the bed to get dressed.”

“I just feel so useless.”

“Is this what you’ve been thinking about all day?”

“Yes.”

I knelt down and held her hands. “I love you, and I’ll always love you whether we have children or not.”

“I know, I know. I just get so down every time my period comes. I’m sick of it.”

“I don’t blame you, but maybe we should be looking at some other options.” I kissed her as I stood up.

“Speaking of that, you remember we have an appointment on Tuesday with Doctor Parker?” With everything else I had forgotten but nodded my head as if I hadn’t. “Would you be willing to go by yourself?”

“Me?”

“I can’t be examined while I’m having my period. And I don’t want to go down there and have to talk about trying to conceive. I mean, not right now, I’m sick of it. Maybe later.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She’s supposed to be one of the best fertility specialists in New England. Appointments are hard to get. Her nurse said it really didn’t matter which one of us went in first.”

“Yeah,” I responded, still lukewarm about the idea.

“Remember,” she pointedly reminded me, “I had to go to our introductory appointment alone.”

I stalled. “What time is it again?”

“You forgot again, didn’t you?”

“No, that’s not true. I’ve only forgotten the time.”

“Four o’clock. I can visit Brittany and then you can come over when you’re done.” Jen held my eyes for a second, and I saw the glimmer of a twinkle.

I studied her for more clues. “I’m not going to have to...”

“I’m pretty sure that’s where they begin.”

“No. Oh, come on.”

Jen’s grin smoothed out some of the strain in her face.

“I can do it here, right?”

“You can, if you’re sure you can get to Brigham and Women’s Hospital in half an hour. Your sample has to be fresh; those little spermies need to be swimming around. Can’t be more than a half-hour old.”

“So I have to do it there.”

Jen pressed her lips together to conceal her smile. “We could do it in the car on the way.”

Saturday

With nothing else to do (his Irish barmaid was working the day shift), LL was suddenly very interested in visiting the knacker's with us. Thus, late Saturday morning, the three of us drove up to North Berwick to see if we could replace Mistral's mane hair for Brittany. When we got there, I had to stop three times to ask directions, twice at the same store, Art's Quick-Mark. Everyone seemed to know Horrie Byam— "Yeah, drives that old yella truck" —but nobody seemed to know quite how to get to his place on Rattlesnake Ridge. Eventually, we were bumping our way up a gravel road. About a quarter-mile in from the main road, we passed a sagging trailer scabbed with rust. Dingy clothes hung from the line, and a dusty mutt, chained to his doghouse, rose to bark at us.

"Couldya?" LL asked.

"Couldya?" Jen queried back.

"Couldya live there and still love me." LL chuckled.

"LL, with you, in a leaky tent," Jen answered.

"See," LL said pointedly to me.

I only shook my head.

The road narrowed to a two-wheeled track knifing up the ridge through scrubby forest. I had to weave from side to side to avoid bottoming out on the ruts and boulders. Thick underbrush scratched the sides and bottom of the car. Right when I didn't think I could travel another ten feet, the track emptied into an old sandpit filled with bones. Piles of them, more bones than I had ever seen in my entire life. Hip joints, shoulder plates, rib cages, spines with vertebrae as large as fists, tossed in piles and bleaching in the sun. A big raven perched on one pile, warily eyeing us as potential competitors. Across the small clearing an old mustard-colored pickup with homemade rails faced us.

“You fellows take me to the nicest places,” Jen quipped from the backseat.

“At least we know we’re in the right place,” I said.

When we got out of the car, the syrupy stench of rotten animal flesh overpowered us. Squawking his protest, the raven relinquished his station. Crows, roosting in the surrounding trees, cawed and screeched. The floor of the sandpit was rough and gravelly, but Jen had replaced her street wheels with fat knobbed tires and had no trouble propelling herself.

Behind Byam’s truck, the road continued, rising out of the sandpit into a scrubby thicket of birches and pines. The truck’s windows were down. A shabby, dirty blanket covered the front seat. Flies swarmed everywhere. Tiparillo butts filled the ashtray. Anything to kill the smell, I thought. From the wooden railings hung a double-bladed ax, its handle and blade stained brown with dried blood. A grimy mutt skittered down the road to greet us, whining and making lazy circles.

Unseen a car grinded noisily up the road we had just traveled. Seconds later a white Volvo station wagon wearing New York plates lurched into view. The driver parked next to my car and got out. About forty-five, he was dressed in a sport shirt and jeans, his thinning blond hair cut in a crew cut.

“Lee McAllister,” he said amiably, holding out his hand.

I finished the introductions, and pointing at his license plate, asked, “What brings you all the way from New York?”

McAllister hesitated a moment or two before answering. “I’m an insurance investigator for Equine Assurance.”

“Really,” LL said. “What are you doing here?”

“Business,” he answered evasively.

“It wouldn’t have anything to do with Mistral?” I asked.

“How’d you know?” He eyed me curiously.

“I was at Bartholow Farms the morning Mistral was found dead,” I said.

“Is that so,” he replied.

“What’s your involvement with his death?” I asked.

He explained, “There’s a couple of suspicious things about his death that I’m looking into. They doubled the insurance on him in March, and owners generally don’t toss a champion horse onto a knacker’s pile.”

“That’s what Bartholow’s trainer said,” I rejoined.

“What exactly are you looking for?” Jen asked, gesturing back at the bone yard.

“I’m hoping to examine the corpse. See if there’s any evidence of foul play. A twenty-two bullet hole in the ear, trace of poison left in the intestines or flesh, electrocution burns, that sort of stuff.”

“No one seemed to suspect foul play last week,” I said.

“And they may be absolutely right. Horses die all the time. But this was a very valuable horse. Equine will be paying nineteen and a half million to the owners. It was only ten million in February. Makes you wonder.”

Raising coverage is one of the telltale signs of insurance fraud, but Winny Bartholow and his crew were savvy business people, and although I knew nothing about their integrity, I couldn’t imagine him doing something that careless. But you never no.

“The better question,” Lee said, “is why the three of you came all the way up here. It can’t be for the air?”

“Brittany, our niece, loved Mistral. When he died, she took a hank of his mane as a memento and then lost it. We were hoping to replace it.”

“Oh,” McAllister replied with more interest than I had expected. “Well, let’s go up and see what we can find.”

The road was steep and rutted by washouts. Small boulders, ground smooth by the glaciers eons ago, rolled underfoot. It was too steep and rough for Jen, and I had to help push her wheelchair. The road flattened some at a small clearing in a thicket of weedy birches. Only large enough to turn a truck around in, the clearing was evidently Horrie Byam’s open-air slaughterhouse. Old tires, a bunch of fifty-five gallon drums, and more bones ringed the clearing. Near one of the barrels lay what was left of a brown cow. Its severed head sat next to its partially skinned carcass. Flies swarmed over it. Animal fat half-filled one of the drums, greasy and rotten with age; hooves filled another to overflowing. The skeleton of another large animal lay under a big pine, chunks of dried flesh still stuck to its bones. The smell was putrid.

Ahead of us, at the end of a short path, a tumbledown shack hunkered in a grove of pines. Built of unpainted scrap, its door and two grimy windows were three or four bubbles off level. Not having left our side, the dog’s yelping pitched higher.

A single drum, part of the circle of barrels, tires, and skeletons, partially blocked the path to the cabin. Apparently, Horrie Byam had only recently been working there, for next to the barrel rested a chain saw, its blade and chain still wet with blood. A cloud of houseflies hovered over the drum and around the chain saw.

Motioning at the still bloody chain saw, McAllister said, “Doesn’t look like he’s gone far.”

“Probably stopped for lunch,” LL deadpanned.

“Oh, gross,” Jen groaned, scrunching up her face in disgust.

“Couldya?” I asked, gesturing at the shack.

“Not on your fucking life,” LL retorted.

At the same time and even more emphatically, Jen answered, “No way!”

Lee McAllister glanced perplexedly back at us. Then, waving the cloud of flies away, he peered into the drum. I presumed he was looking for the remains of Mistral. “Holy shit!” he exclaimed, recoiling in shock away from the barrel. Horror made McAllister’s face its own. “There’s a—”

A gun exploded. Its bullet ripped a hole into the drum, thumping to a stop. Another gun went off. A bullet whizzed by. I could feel its hot trail.

McAllister’s expression of horror stretched tighter. Jen and I just looked at each other, too dumbfounded to move. Only LL reacted, reaching for his handgun.

McAllister’s mouth, frozen wide open, uttered, “Body—”

Gunfire erupted all around us. I tipped Jen out of her wheelchair and dove down beside her.

“—In there,” McAllister finished, as he clambered into a clump of shrubs to our left.

LL had thrown himself flat onto the ground behind a pile of old tires to our right and fired several rounds in the direction where the first shot came from. I pulled Jen behind two of the fifty-five gallon drums. Once I got her there, my body trembled uncontrollably. We pressed ourselves into the ground. Bullets seemed to come from every direction, slamming again and again into the drums and tires. Undistracted by the tumult, houseflies swarmed all over us. We didn’t dare raise our arms to brush them away.

LL signaled that we had two attackers. One was either in the shack or near it. The other was in the woods to the right of the shack. From the amount of gunfire, I thought it was an army. From their vantage points, both gunmen had a clear view of the clearing and the road. We were completely pinned down. Trapped in a bone yard, I morbidly thought.

“Got any ideas?” I asked LL.

“I can’t see either one of them,” LL muttered, as he pulled a spare clip out of his pocket coat. “And this is it for ammo.”

More bullets splashed around us. LL squeezed off a single round in return.

Jen said, “If I could get to the car, I could call the police.”

“How are you going to reach our car?” I asked. Another fusillade punctuated the impossibility of her suggestion.

“In my wheelchair. It’s downhill. I could coast down that road in half a sec.”

“Is she crazy?” LL asked.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “You’d flip your chair before you got a quarter the way down.” But as I turned over in my mind our other options, there weren’t many, and none were terribly propitious.

To our right there was movement through the woods. One of our attackers was circling. Rolling slightly onto his side, LL aimed the gun toward the rustling trees and fired. In response more bullets thumped into the barrels. The drums and tires shielded us, but if the attackers were to flank us, we wouldn’t last a minute.

LL fired back. Two shots, and then I heard the ominous hard click of an empty chamber. As LL shoved a fresh magazine into the gun, he said, “Tell Jen to stay put. She’ll be completely exposed. They’ll tear her to bits.”

I wormed my way over so I was behind a single barrel, the one that McAllister had looked into.

“What are you doing?” LL demanded.

“You’ll see,” I said. My heart pounded so hard that I wouldn’t have been surprised to see it jump out of my chest and hop down the road. Jen’s eyes met mine. Fear creased her face.

“Tony,” she said prayerfully, half reaching back for me.

“Don’t worry,” I whispered.

Don’t worry! As if to demonstrate the idiocy of my cavalier courage, both our assailants rained shots at us. And I could see why. The gunman in the woods continued to move closer to our flank under the covering fire. Jen pressed lower into the ground. LL fired a single return shot.

Reaching up quickly, I yanked at the top of the barrel, tipping it over. I scooted over behind it for protection. The severed head of an old man had fallen from the barrel and was inches from my face. Horror popped his eyes wide open and fresh blood clotted his scraggly beard. I puked, my stomach emptying like a burst balloon. Horrie Byam, I figured.

The overturned drum concealed Horrie Byam’s head from Jen. McAllister could see it, but he turned away. Jen did see me throw up. Fear was stitched onto her face.

I started to crawl backwards through the clearing, letting the drum, which was acting as a shield, roll after me. After one revolution, the barrel no longer hid Horrie Byam’s head from Jen. Her eyes went wide with shock, and she started to gag.

LL divined my plan. He held up five fingers and pointed at his gun. Five rounds left. He couldn’t afford to expend all of them providing me with cover. That I knew.

Both our assailants could also see what I was up to and opened fire. Crawling backwards with the barrel between the shooters and me was too slow. Bullets raked across the clearing, ripping into the barrel and tearing up the earth. The gunman on our flank started to move again. LL fired a shot in that direction. But the other gunman quickly pinned him back behind the pile of tires.

Then the bullets rained in on me, closer and closer, kicking grit into my eyes. I flipped around behind the barrel so that I was facing downhill, holding it back with my feet. With my hands free, I took off again, crawling as fast as I could on all fours, the drum rolling behind my

feet. Byam's hand and forearm, still clothed in a sleeve, fell out of the barrel. So did a couple of nasty looking hooves.

I crossed the clearing and reached the crest of the road where the pitch steepened. Crablike, I clambered down the hill, the barrel tumbling behind me. More of Horrie Byam spilled out, a foot still in its work boot.

Lee McAllister shouted after me, "There's a revolver in my glove box."

I could no longer control the barrel with my feet, and it started bouncing down the rutted road. I spun around so I could steer it with my hands. Too late. It had a mind of its own and veered off. I dove for the barrel, but it bounced over my outstretched arms. As it skittered down the road, the rest of Horrie Byam fell out of it. His innards slithered down the road like a slinky. The barrel left a trail of bloody body parts and hooves.

Pressing my body hard against the rocky ground, I looked up. At the edge of the road, only feet from me, the flanking gunman emerged from the brush. The next second lasted a lifetime, every moment of it branded into my memory. I can remember his every feature: gingham shirt, jeans, dark hair cut short. My heart stood still. Although my head screamed, "Run, hide, jump, do something!" I lay motionless, staring dumbly at my executioner. I'm going to watch myself die. Right here in Horrie Byam's bone yard. My executioner took aim. His eyes, like the gun barrel hole, were black, lifeless voids.

I shut my eyes, heard the shot, and waited for the hot gob of metal to plow through me, the final sensation. But there was nothing. I wondered if this is how it happened, no pain, no feelings, nothing, just a painless shift from corporeal to ethereal. I looked up. The gunman's eyes were shocked wide and white. His body crumpled forward down the hill and rolled a couple of times like a rag doll. His gun, a small semiautomatic, tumbled out of his grasp. For a

moment, the gunfire ceased and all was silent. The road looked like the highway to hell, littered with butchered body parts and one of the butcher's corpse.

Lying prone at the crest of the hill, LL gave me a salute and rolled out of sight. I got up and ran to my car. Shaking uncontrollably, I had to steady the phone against the wheel in order to punch in 911. It took what seemed like forever to provide emergency dispatch with all the information they required. I imagined the tape of my frantic call being played on Hard Copy—"Jesus Christ, can't you hear the gunfire!"

The remaining gunman continued to pound LL and Jen with gunfire. I couldn't hear any answering fire and worried whether LL had any bullets left. I raced to Lee McAllister's Volvo, opened the glove compartment, and pulled a squarish chromed handgun from its holster. The gun wasn't loaded, and I couldn't get the magazine to stay. I pulled the trigger, the hammer, and anything else that would move in a vain effort to load it.

Desperate, I grabbed both the gun and clip and ran up the road as far as I dared and then crawled to where the dead shooter's semiautomatic lay. I picked it up and, hidden by the crest of the hill, scrambled into the woods, circling below the clearing and emerging behind a pile of bones and a barrel. I hoped the drum was full of something that would stop bullets.

LL was in front of me. "LL," I stage-whispered.

He turned and saw me. I held up the two weapons and the clip and pantomimed that I couldn't figure out how to load Lee's gun. He returned a look of pure disgust. I signaled that I was going to throw him the clip and gun. Then he looked worried. He obviously did not have a load of confidence in my throwing arm.

Crouching behind the barrel, I tossed the gun underhand. Bull's-eye. The gun landed softly right next to his shoulder. My toss of the clip wasn't quite as accurate. Still, it landed within easy reach. Blowing the dirt off both, LL stuffed the magazine into the handgun and

smiled back at me. Another volley of bullets rained into the tires in front of him. LL fired two shots back with his own gun. The third try was an empty click, and he switched to Lee's. He motioned for me to move back into the woods and try to close in on our surviving attacker.

“When I hear you fire, I'll move in,” he said in a low voice.

I crept back into the woods. So far the gunman hadn't spotted me. Moving slowly and carefully, in a couple of minutes I was even with Horrie Byam's “couldya.” Our attacker crouched behind a stack of firewood outside the shack. Wearing a ball cap and with heavily tattooed, Popeye-like forearms, he would jump up every now and then and blanket the clearing with gunfire. I took up a position behind a downed tree, took aim, and squeezed the trigger. The gun wiggled and jumped in my hand like a snake, erupting in a spasm of explosions, spewing bullets everywhere. Too late, I realized that the gun was fully automatic. Our assailant jerked up, too shocked to return my fire.

LL was racing toward the shack, ready to fire. “Come on Tony, let's get him!” he hollered.

The stocky gunman retreated, running rapidly into the woods behind the shack. LL and I reached the cabin at the same time.

“He went that way,” I exclaimed, pointing to where he had disappeared into the woods. We could hear him crashing through the brush farther down the hill.

“Good,” LL said, “I've only got a couple of rounds left and you wasted all yours trying to punch holes in the sky.”

“All I did was pull the trigger, and the thing went crazy,” I explained.

LL's grimace told me that he didn't think much of my excuse. “You don't yank it all the way back. Jesus, did you learn anything in college besides drinking?”

We returned to the clearing.

Jen was sitting up and smiling bravely, as she brushed the dirt off her clothes and the flies away from her head. “Look, even my legs are shaking.”

And sure enough, her paralyzed legs still trembled. I picked her up and cradled her. She wrapped her arms tightly around my neck and nestled her head against my shoulder.

Sirens wailed up the dirt road. Picking our way through the dismembered limbs and torso of the last knacker on the seacoast, we went down to the sandpit to wait for the police.

* * *

Both the Berwick and Maine State Police arrived. Although LL didn’t know any of the officers, within fifteen minutes he was unofficially directing the investigation. Jen, and I answered questions, wrote out witness statements, and brushed away flies. The police sealed off the area, took posthumous photographs of the dead gunman and the various pieces of Horrie Byam, and dispatched a squad of officers over the ridge to search for the other killer.

Having finished with our statements, we sat in McAllister’s car with the air-conditioning on to escape the flies and smell. Like soldiers sharing the same foxhole, we were becoming quickly acquainted. Lee hailed from Long Island, where he now lived with his wife and three teenaged daughters. His father had trained trotters, and as a kid Lee had mucked out stables and exercised horses. He had trained racehorses on his own for about ten years, but eventually chose steadier employment as an investigator for Equine Assurance.

It was nearly four by that time, and we were basically waiting around for LL to finish up. When he wasn’t too occupied as chief busybody, he would drop by Lee’s car, favoring us with a new tidbit of information. Horrie Byam had been shot before he had been dismembered, which thankfully put my grisliest thoughts to rest. The other body had no identification, no wallet, no keys, not even a slip of paper or a laundry mark. And the police had had no luck

tracking down the other killer. It was their belief that Horrie Byam's murderers had parked a car on a back road on the other side of the ridge, and that the survivor made his getaway in that.

Recalling my original reason for wanting to go to Horrie Byam's, I suggested, "Do you think we should ask the police if we can look around to see if there's any part of Mistral left?"

"Mistral was never here," Lee declared. "Otherwise why bother killing Horrie Byam."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"With Horrie Byam dead, it's now impossible to prove that Mistral never came here."

When he only saw question marks in our expressions, he explained. "Sending Mistral to the knacker was just a ruse. By now Mistral's carcass is gone, cremated or buried, probably buried out in the woods some place—"

"Cremated?" I asked.

"Exactly like humans, except the oven is big enough for a horse." Lee returned to his explanation. "They were worried that Byam would confirm what I already knew. That Bartholow had the stallion killed and disposed of him some place else."

"So," Jen said, completing his explanation, "once they knew you were coming up to talk to Byam, they had to get rid of him."

"That's my guess," Lee confirmed.

"Who's 'they?'" I asked.

"The Posse. No doubt about it."

"The Posse?" Jen repeated.

"A gang of horse assassins, contract killers for hire. I've been chasing them for three years now. I'm sure those two were part of it. I wouldn't put it past them to chop up a harmless old man."

In response to Jen's questioning, Lee explained further about the 'Posse.' The horse industry has always been notorious for its crooks and conmen, but the Posse had taken all that a step further. It is organized evil." The Posse, to the best of his knowledge, had come into existence about five years earlier and within the last two years had picked up their pace considerably. Infamous in the horse world, they had an untraceable, offshore number, which was so well known that even Lee had it.

"Their fee is twenty-five percent of whatever the owner receives. Half must be wired in advance to an offshore account. Recently they have been using Antigua, but the accounts and their locations change with almost every job. The balance becomes due after the owner receives the insurance proceeds, but wired to a different account, say in the Cayman Islands. I only know of one owner who didn't pay the second installment. They broke both his legs with a crowbar, same as they did to his horse, tied him behind one of his horses, and let him spend the night being dragged around the pasture. He paid and was out of the horse business a month later."

"What a horrible way to make a living," Jen observed.

"The insurance industry estimates that the Posse rakes in between eight and twelve million a year."

"Why would the insurance companies pay if they know the horse had been killed?"

"The operative word is 'know.' If we *kenem*, if we could prove it was insurance fraud, we wouldn't pay a nickel. The problem is that horses aren't as hardy as everyone thinks. They die all the time, from colic, from eating bad hay, or they have to be put down when they kick their stall and break a leg. Telling whether a horse was poisoned or ate bad hay or had its leg broken with a crowbar is not easy. Our policies require the owner to preserve the animal for an autopsy, but they get around that by waiting until the last minute to notify us, and then saying

that they had to dispose of the horse before it putrefies and becomes a health hazard.

Bartholow Farms has been cremating their horses. We recently told them they were not to cremate any more animals. Which is why they whisked Mistral off to the knacker's—supposedly!—before I could get up here.”

The whole idea of killing horses for money floored me. “But Mistral was really famous. His stud fees were huge, I heard.”

“Mistral’s a tough one to figure. His stud fees would easily generate a lot more than nineteen and half million, so financially it doesn’t make sense.”

I interrupted him. “I just finished reading an article about how successful Bartholow Farms is.”

“The one in Forbes?”

“Yes.”

“We have reason to believe Winny Bartholow has done this before. In fact, we know he has. To someone like him, it’s a part of business. But I could care less about Bartholow; it’s the Posse I’m after. They’re an epidemic, a disgrace to horse lovers everywhere.”

Jen said, “I can’t imagine anyone having a horse like Mistral murdered. It would be like killing your dog.”

Lee thought for a second before responding. “Horse people have a different relationship with their animals than we do with pets. You buy a cat, it lives for fifteen years and by the time it dies, it’s part of your family. You buy a horse, it’s an investment. Every little girl who loves her horse will probably only own that animal for part of its life. She moves up to a better one or goes off to college, and the family sells the old one to another little girl. When you get into the big leagues and have dozens or hundreds of horses, they’re not a lot different from

a herd of cows. Having one killed in order to buy a better one is not the same as hiring someone to murder the family dog.”

“Still,” Jen protested.

Lee held up his hands to show he didn’t agree with what he had said. “It’s a rotten business. I can’t imagine killing a horse for profit. That’s why I’d like to catch these bastards.”

I tilted my face up the road to where one of the gunmen lay dead. “There’s one down.”

* * *

LL knocked on the driver’s window and Lee rolled it down. “Shouldn’t be too much longer and we can leave,” he said. “They think we may have interrupted a robbery.”

“Why would robbers chop Horrie Byam up and dump him in a barrel if all they wanted was his money?” Lee asked.

“That’s exactly what I tried to tell them, but Maine cops are not always the sharpest blades in the tool chest,” he said before returning to his meddling.

Slowly swinging his head side to side, Lee said to us. “It’s the same old story. The police aren’t very interested in chasing down horse killers. A couple of times I’ve handed the authorities a complete case, from soup to nuts. All they had to do was arrest the guy and charge him with insurance fraud. Couldn’t be bothered.”

* * *

By the time we were able to pry LL off the investigation (much to the relief of the Maine State Police I’m sure), it was nearly five. We bounced and slid our way down the Rattlesnake Ridge following Lee’s white Volvo. Pasted to his rear bumper was the sticker, “I ♥ Morgans.”

After a while LL announced, "I knew a Morgan once. Real pretty. Stockbroker in Boston."

"Morgans are a breed of horses," Jen explained.

"This Morgan was a cute filly too, built for riding."

Jen slapped the back of LL's head.

At the bottom of the hill, a Berwick Police cruiser blocked access to the road. Several television camera crews and news reporters were hanging around beyond it. A Seven on the Seacoast camera truck was there, and so was their reporter Bob Norton, who knew me well. Inwardly I groaned. Norton and my judicial license plate demolished any hope of anonymity. Seeing two vehicles coming off the ridge electrified the media like fresh meat in front of a shark. They formed a mini gauntlet, and Lee had to slow to a crawl.

Having kept us waiting for couple of hours, LL was now impatient to get home for his first whiskey of the evening. Reaching over he blew the car horn. Startled, the reporters looked back. LL pointed at me as the culprit, shrugging his shoulders as if to say that he couldn't understand why I blew the horn either.

"Thanks," I said dryly. "That should help get us right out of here."

When Bob Norton noticed whose car it was, he came running over, knocking on the window even as I was rolling it down.

"Judge," he asked, "can we get a statement? We'll be quick."

"No comment."

Ignoring me, Norton waved his camera crew over and asked, his voice now modulated for television, "Judge Paris, do you know who was shooting up there?"

"No comment," I repeated.

"Is it true that you were the one to call 911?" Norton continued.

More reporters and cameramen converged at our car. No longer blocked by the media, Lee's Volvo eased ahead until he was able to escape onto the main road.

LL leaned so far over that he was practically lying in my lap. "Turn the camera off and let us out of here," he commanded.

I idled slowly ahead into the opening left by Lee's car and closed the window. Undeterred, Norton walked alongside the car, his microphone hard against the window, all of it on videotape. I turned onto the main road and sped away. In my review mirror I could see the cameras still trained on my car.

* * *

It was nearly six by the time we got home. Jen had invited Lee McAllister for dinner and overnight, and he had followed us home. We let him use the bathroom first. While he showered, Jen and I stripped off everything we'd been wearing, and I bagged it up and tossed it in the trash. Jen took her shower next. Dressed in my bathrobe, I fixed myself a scotch and collapsed onto the sofa in the family room, clicking on the television. Lee showed up a couple minutes later.

I held up my scotch. "You want a drink?"

"Do you have any beer?"

I went into the kitchen. Returning with his beer, I saw myself on the evening news. It wasn't pretty. Me staring blankly at the camera muttering "no comment," while LL, twisted onto my lap, is barking, "let us out of here."

Taking a long draught of his beer, Lee lifted his glass in an imaginary toast to show how good the beer tasted to him. "I wondered what was going on back there."

“Well, now you know,” I replied, marveling at the twists the last seven hours had taken. “It’s been a hell of a day.”

Barefoot, her hair still wet from the shower, Jen wheeled into the family room. “Your turn,” she said to me.

I was changing in our bedroom when the telephone rang. I knew then that I would be spending the evening fielding phone calls from family and friends who had been watching the news. The first was from my sister Roseanne, warning that Nonie would be calling soon.

And she did. “Where have you been? You promised me that you would be visiting Brittany and spend time with family. Instead you’re getting shot at, dragging your poor crippled wife along. It’s a wonder you’re all right.”

“We’re fine,” I assured her.

“I know. If you had gone to Boston today, to see your only godchild, to be a part of the family, none of this would have happened.”

“I’m sorry, Nonie, but we went up there to find some mane or tail hairs from Brittany’s favorite horse to cheer her up.”

“For a few strands of hair you abandon your poor godchild. The whole family was there, all asking where’s Tony and Jen. I kept saying, they’ll be here soon, and then we turn on the television.”

“I didn’t know we were going to be shot at or else I wouldn’t have gone.”

“All this is a sign, you know, a warning to put your family first.” She continued, up one side of me, down the other. Fifteen minutes later, after assuring me that she was telling me all this for my own good, she finished.

As soon as she hung up, it was Sal and Barbara on the telephone. My mother’s words rang guiltily in my head, and I apologized for not having made it to Mass General and explained

why we had gone to Horrie Byam's establishment. But my excuses were unnecessary; they could have cared less whether Jen and I showed up. They were more interested in making sure we were okay.

"How's Brittany doing?" I asked.

"You know your godchild," Barbara replied. "She keeps talking about wanting to get a wheelchair just like Aunt Jen's, one that goes really fast."

The next call was from my sister Lucy, and I talked with her until she asked to speak to my wife.

Jen fixed some ham and cheese sandwiches for Lee and me. The rest of supper was leftovers: a small dish of cold peas, half a bag of chips, some carrot and celery sticks, and an opened jar of sliced pickles. I didn't think I'd be hungry, but the food tasted good and I dug in.

Lee asked between bites, "Who was it again who wanted some of Mistral's hair?"

I told him about Brittany's infatuation with Mistral, how we had been there the morning he had died, and explained that she had pulled out a handful of his mane.

"What did Mistral look like?" he asked.

"You're asking the wrong person," I replied. "He looked like a dead horse to me."

"Did you notice any dried sweat. It would have been whitish and flaky."

I gave him a quizzical look and answered, "No, not that I remember. Why?"

"Horses occasionally die of colic. Their intestines become twisted and blocked. It's a pretty agonizing death. Most horses will roll and thrash, sweating up a storm."

"I remember someone asking about colic that morning and one of the grooms or trainers said it hadn't been a problem with Mistral."

"Anything else you remember about that morning?"

“Not really. There was an old Irish trainer who was there, Mac O’Farrell. I saw him a couple of days ago, and he was pretty unhappy that Bartholow Farms had sent Mistral to the knacker’s. Said a stallion of his caliber should have been properly buried.”

“He’s right, but they didn’t want that corpse ever found.” Lee pointed a carrot stick in my direction. “By the way, what happened to the hair?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “Last Monday my niece fell off her horse and nearly died. Broke her neck and was kicked in the head.”

Having finally gotten off the telephone, Jen rolled into the family room and up to the milking table.

I thought I noted Lee’s attention turning up a notch. “What was she doing?”

“I don’t know. Her instructor said she was cantering around the riding ring.”

“Really.” He leaned back in his chair and massaged the back of his head with one hand. “Do you know what happened to the hair?”

“It must have fallen off because it wasn’t on her helmet, and LL and I searched the riding ring a couple of days ago.” Nodding ever so slightly, he listened with a faraway look in his eyes. “Is there something we should know about all this?” I asked.

“No ... no,” he replied. “Did anyone know you were going to visit Horrie Byam?”

“Sure,” I answered. “Mac O’Farrell, the trainer, thought it was worth the chance, and Jason Klingman, Brittany’s instructor, gave us the directions.”

“Oh,” he said casually and went back to his sandwich and beer.

* * *

Jen and I held onto one another all night, drawing security from each other's presence. Around one in the morning, I could tell from Jen's breathing and shifting that she wasn't asleep. Lying on my back, I said, "Every time I start to fall asleep, I see Horrie Byam's head."

Jen stroked my flank. "I can't get rid of that rotten stink. I swear it's stuck to the inside of my nostrils."

"Maybe we should get up and take another shower," I suggested.

"I don't think soap and water will ever get rid of this smell."

Jen didn't say anything more, and I tried to clear my mind and fall to sleep.

She said, "You really scared me up there. I was really worried about losing you."

"You won't get rid of me that easily," I said with a touch of bravado I didn't feel.

Sunday

Considering what we had gone through, once we got to sleep, we slept right through, not waking until a little past eight. It may have helped that Sunday morning came sodden and leaden. When I went into the family room, Lee McAllister was already up and dressed.

“How long have you been up?” I asked.

“Not long.”

“Would you like some coffee?” I asked.

“A quick cup and then I need to hit the road.”

Jen insisted on packing him a sandwich and a couple of peaches for his trip home. While she was doing that, Lee and I exchanged cards, each of us writing our home phone numbers on the back. I walked him out to his car.

Just as he was ready to leave, he asked, “Judge, do you know how long your niece has been riding?”

I thought for a second. “Her mother still rides some, and she started her out pretty young. I’m thinking she’s been riding steadily for the last two or three years.”

Lee began to say something and then closed his lips. A moment later, he asked, “How good a rider would you say she was?”

“I don’t know. Okay, I guess. Why?”

“Just curious.”

* * *

After Lee departed we rushed around picking up and getting dressed, but we weren’t able to leave for Boston for another hour. It was probably subconscious, rather than deliberate. Whatever the reason, we arrived at the hospital chapel a little late. Well enough to attend,

Brittany sat in the back because there was no room for her institutional wheelchair at the front. Her parents stood on either side of her. A cap of stubble covered her head, which along with her titanium halo gave her an elfin, Joan of Arc look. Jen immediately rolled over beside her, kissed her fingers and touched them to Brittany's lips. I joined Brittany's brothers in one of the back pews.

My family offered up enough prayers, petitions, special intentions, and fervent entreaties to bring salvation to most of the infidels on the planet. But one glance over at Jen and Brittany turned those prayers and petitions into mockeries. My wife, paralyzed, and unable to conceive that which she desired above all, sat next to my godchild, crowned with a metal circle screwed to her skull and stuck in a wheelchair for the rest of her life, exactly like her aunt. Where was God in all this, I questioned. There was no point, nothing to be gained, no lesson to be learned from what they were enduring. It was life in the raw—risky, cruel, and fateful. The day before couldn't illustrate it better. We go to look for a clump of horsehair and escape with our lives. Whether we interrupted a robbery or happened upon a contingent of the Posse finishing a job, for a half an hour our lives had no more worth than a mosquito. One unlucky swat and it's gone.

Monday

Monday morning, when I pulled into Widow Buehler's driveway, LL sat in the bay window finishing his coffee. The second he spotted me, he sprang to his feet and, engaging Widow Buehler in conversation, steered her away from the window. A moment later a dark-haired young woman, her hair still wet from the shower, ran out the door carrying a small gym bag. Without asking, she jumped into the backseat, crouching down to avoid being seen.

"Hi, you must be Tony," she said brightly. "I'm Rosemary, a friend of Lionel's." She had a cute freckled face unspoiled by make-up and a musical Irish accent. "He said you could give me a ride home. I hope you don't mind." Nonchalantly, she ran a brush through her wet hair.

"No," I stammered. Hampton Beach was at least thirty minutes out of my way.

Having lumbered down the walk, LL lowered his bulk into the front seat. He glanced caringly at Rosemary and then flashed me a look that a woman should never witness. "I see you have met," he said. "Rosemary honey, scoot down out of sight, would you."

She slumped farther down, and I backed out of the driveway. Standing at her bay window, ignorant of LL's shenanigans, Widow Buehler sweetly waved goodbye to LL who waved back. He picked up my Coastal Courier, and Rosemary returned to brushing her wet hair.

Once we were out of sight, Rosemary sat up and leaned forward, draping her arm over LL's shoulder. They caressed one another and cooed cloyingly, as if I wasn't there. She got out at a decrepit apartment building a couple of blocks away from the beach, and we drove back inland to the courthouse. There was no way I was going to be at court before nine.

"I've probably got a docket a mile long. And what am I doing? I'm playing fucking chauffeur to one of your bimbos when I should be at court."

“Did I tell you how old she is?”

“Yes, a hundred times.”

“Thirty-one,” he said anyway. “Guess what she calls me?”

“Please, I do not want to know. In fact, I’m ordering you not to tell me.” I held my hand up to my right ear.

“Bear.”

I dropped my head in resignation.

Wagging his head and shoulders, He chanted softly in a high-pitched voice, “Yeah, bear; You go bear; Oooh, bear.”

* * *

Judicial license plates are a mixed blessing. Being identified as someone important can be nice; being easily identified is not. If you speed, you probably won’t get a ticket, but the driver you pass may very well write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, who in turn will pen an editorial reminder that you are not above the law. Heedless of the risk, that Monday morning I sped all the way to Brentwood, passing everything I could. Despite that, I drove into the court parking lot at twenty minutes past nine.

* * *

As I walked through the clerk’s office, Margaret handed me a fistful of message slips. Everyone wanted to know if I was all right after our adventure at the knacker’s.

One was from a Maine State Police detective, who had a few follow-up questions for me. I returned his call first. They seemed convinced that we had interrupted a robbery. Horrie Byam didn’t keep a bank account, and there were rumors that he had squirreled away every

dollar he ever earned. The police had thoroughly searched every obvious place (not a job I would have wished on anyone) and had found nothing, which increased their belief that our surviving attacker had made off with his lifesavings.

You never know, particularly for an old woodchuck like Horrie Byam, but somehow I doubted his nest egg, if it even existed, made it worth killing him. I put in a plug for Lee McAllister's theory that the murderers were part of the Posse and were covering up the killing of Mistral for insurance money. "Why would robbers chop Horrie Byam up and dump him in a barrel if all they wanted was his money?" I asked.

"There are plenty of sickos out there. Very few criminals act rationally."

"Are you investigating the insurance fraud angle?" I persisted.

"We're going to explore every potential avenue. We're going to talk again with Mr. McAllister to see what leads and information he has."

As soon as I hung-up, Margaret's voice came over the line. "The Chief Justice has been on hold waiting to talk to you." I pressed the blinking button.

The hail-fellow-well-met voice of my Chief Justice was unmistakable. "Hey, *amico*, you're a star." The only other Italian on the superior court, he always reverted to his Boston-Italian accent when talking to me, as if he was speaking code to some trusted consigliere. With every one else he spoke perfect English.

"It's the residuals I'm after."

"Can we girls talk?"

"Sure, Chief."

"Tony, you're a good judge, low maintenance, but when I see you on the television, I want to see you dressed in a black robe, American flag on your left, New Hampshire flag on your right, and a judge's bench in front of you. You, *amico*, you I see leaving a crime scene."

“Yeah, sorry Chief.” He had enough problems, I knew, without me causing him more.

“Kid, you know how fond I am of you, but I have to think of the whole court.”

“Listen Chief, I’m real sorry. We only went up there to get a hank of horse hair for my niece, and these guys started—”

“*Amico*, you’re not getting my point.”

“Yeah,” I answered. He wasn’t much interested in mine either, but what else could I say?

Tuesday

Not wanting to disclose to Ralph the main reason I was going to Boston, I used visiting Brittany as an easy excuse to take the afternoon off. Happy to help, Ralph scurried around, rearranging the docket to free up the afternoon, assigning me a final divorce hearing that would be over by lunchtime. The case was a no-brainer between an alcoholic husband and his hardworking wife. He was only forty, but looked twenty years older. Drinking had bruised his face prune-purple. His voice slurred and slipped, and I accused him of being drunk on the witness stand until his attorney satisfied me that his brain was so addled by drink that he talked that way normally. They had had five children, and looking at him, I wondered if all of them could possibly be his, but kept my mouth shut for fear of complicating the case further. His wife was a scrawny, tough bird who sometimes worked three jobs in their little mill town to keep the family afloat. A five-apartment tenement, a gift from his parents, had housed the family and supplemented her income with meager rents from the other tenants unfortunate enough to live there. The lawyers had supervised the sale of the tenement, and the only issue for me was to divide the five thousand dollar profit. There was no child support. Instead, the children received a social security stipend because their father's alcoholism qualified him for social security disability. Not a difficult case but the lawyers occupied two hours battling over the only valuable crumb left of this union.

The father claimed he was a househusband, getting the children up and off to school, managing the building and tenants, and being home when the children returned from school. It was nonsense, a fairy tale. The mother reported he was too drunk to get up most mornings, and was invariably drunk in the afternoon when the children arrived home from school. He was so pathetic the mother resorted to hiring a neighbor, a retired widow to care for the children in the afternoons until she finished work.

To make certain I got the point, in an act of legal overkill if there ever was one, the mother's last witness of the morning was the elderly neighbor. The lawyer asked for her name. "Marie Marcotte," she announced with a strong French-Canadian accent. Then he asked where she lived. She rose slightly out of her seat so she could see the father better, and pointing a bony finger at him, pronounced, "Right up the street from that no-good, drunken, son-of-a-bitch."

LL dashed from the courtroom, holding a hand to his face in an effort to conceal his laughter, which was all too obvious from his heaving shoulders. I had to maintain my judicial composure for another ten minutes while the lawyer had her elaborate on exactly what she meant by "drunken, no-good son-of-a-bitch."

* * *

As soon as the divorce case concluded, I picked up Jen and the two of us ate lunch in the car as I tried to keep up with the speed of the other cars on I-95 leading into Boston. We arrived at Mass General at half past one. Two of Brittany's little friends were visiting her. While Barbara worked on a needlepoint, the two girls sat on the bed on either side of Brittany watching afternoon cartoons. Barbara and Jen went to the cafeteria for iced teas. I reoccupied Barbara's straight-backed chair, swinging it around so I could watch the cartoons too.

The three girls were fairly quiet, Brittany in particular. The other two would occasionally try to engage her in conversation, commenting on something they were watching or passing on some tidbit about what was happening in Dover. In response Brittany would rarely speak, sticking mainly to smiles or frowns.

Trying to get them interested in something, I offered to play Chutes and Ladders with them. Brittany's friends showed some hesitant interest, but she formed a circle with her lips as we waited until the words "no thanks" came out. An embarrassed silence followed and all of us

refocused on the television that was playing a commercial. The stillness was broken when Jen and Barbara arrived back with three bowls of ice cream. Happy to feed their discomfort, the girls dug in.

* * *

The traffic from Mass General to Brigham and Women's Hospital wasn't bad at all, and I quickly located a space in a parking garage practically next to the pedestrian walkway. The doctor was even on time for my appointment. All auspicious signs.

Doctor Parker was my age, attractive with dark hair and a diamond engagement ring the size of a breadbox. To calm anxious supplicants her office décor was deliberately nonmedical. The colors were light, beige carpet, cream walls, floor to ceiling white bookcases, brightened further by a wall of windows. Her desk was in the corner, but she conducted her interviews at an arrangement of two wingback chairs facing a pale gray loveseat. Neatly arrayed on the coffee table between us were brochures about conception: *You and Conception*, *Roads to Conception*, *Male Infertility—Causes and Cures*.

Jen had already provided most of my health information, but Doctor Parker did ask a series of questions that she'd had good discretion to skip with my wife. Had I ever been infected with a sexually transmitted disease? "Only if you count falling in love," I joked. What drugs had I used? Was I using? Had I ever impregnated another woman? My history of groin injuries. Any testicular abnormalities? I wanted to answer that I'd never conducted a survey but believed mine to be relatively normal. However, after my first humorous foray I had the sense that Doctor Parker wasn't a big fan of reproductive jokes.

She also inquired about how we were doing emotionally. I shared my concerns about Jen's near obsession with conception, illustrating my point by describing how she'd reacted to the arrival of her most recent period.

"Failure to conceive can be enormously stressful to some women. There are going to be peaks and valleys. I'd say she's pretty typical for someone who is having difficulty conceiving."

"Do you think it's the paraplegia?" I asked.

"I haven't done an internal exam yet, but her ob-gyn's records don't suggest any problem. Some paraplegics can suffer from autonomic hyperreflexia. When stressed by pregnancy, their bodies may react abnormally, and blood pressure can rise to dangerous levels, but my recollection—" She flipped through the records "—is that Jen's trauma was fairly low down. Ah, here it is, T-9 and 10." Doctor Parker looked up at me. "She's really not a pregnancy risk candidate with that cervical spine injury. Now, another complication is unrecognized labors. But I've worked with a number of paraplegics with pretty good success. Right now I'm helping a couple, both of whom are quadriplegics. Jen's condition shouldn't be much of a factor, if any."

The doctor turned to what we would be doing at that appointment, starting with a short lecture on sperm analysis. Counting them: twenty million or more with each ejaculation. Their morphology: short tails, no tails. Their motility: how fast the little suckers swim. Then she counseled me that if my test results were not good, there remained a number of other options, such as intrauterine insemination, in vitro insemination, zygote intrafallopian transfer. All of which only made me more resolved to demonstrate my Italian heritage.

"Have you ejaculated in the last forty-eight hours?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Like I mentioned, Jen's having her period."

“Sorry. I’d forgotten her menses. You haven’t masturbated in the last forty-eight hours either, have you?”

“No.”

Rising, Doctor Parker went to her desk and buzzed someone. A minute later, a male nurse showed up. “Dan will show you where to go.”

Dan led me down a crowded and busy hall. Three nurses were working at a thirty-foot long desk, above which were shelves of patients’ records. The restrooms were located on the opposite side of the hall. On the men’s room door it said, “If door closed, room is occupied.”

None of the nurses looked at me, although they had to have seen me come down the hall from Doctor Parker’s office. Dan pushed the door open and clicked on the light. He handed me a small reed basket. In it were two Playboys, a small brown paper bag folded flat, on top of which was a resealable sandwich bag. I’m sure I appeared mortified, but even that couldn’t conceal my bewilderment over the sandwich bag.

Dan noticed my surprise. He whispered, “Less spilling. Quantity is critical.”

With those final words of encouragement, I closed the door. The room was a typical hospital restroom, sink and toilet, decorated with printed directions for washing your hands and obtaining an uncontaminated sample of urine. Fully dressed, I sat on the toilet seat, paging through one of the Playboys, hoping it would inspire me. But I was no longer fifteen, and all I could think about was the nurses working in the hall. They were only several feet away, and I could hear them shifting in their chairs and walking up and down the hall. Two people were talking right outside the door. I couldn’t make out what they were saying, but I could imagine. “I hope this guy doesn’t take as long as that dork last week.” “Anyone want to be in the pool that he finishes in under five minutes?”

There's no need to reveal how long, but after a respectable period of time I emerged from the restroom. Dan was sitting at the end of the long desk, talking to another male nurse. The other nurses and staff politely looked away. Like a milkmaid, I carried my basket to Dan. On top was a brown paper sack concealing a plastic sandwich bag of my ejaculate.

"Good going," Dan said encouragingly, as if I'd just made a nice downfield block. "We'll have the results in a couple of days. When you call, ask for me."

* * *

As soon as Jen had closed the car door, she asked, "How'd the appointment go?"

"Humiliating, degrading. The only bright spot was the nurse—very attractive, by the way. She gave me ever-so-helpful, intimate, hands-on assistance."

Jen shot me a mock glance of reproach and said, "I don't care how you did it; I just want to know the results."

"They said I could call later this week. But don't worry, this nurse was very impressed with my equipment."

* * *

Fighting rush hour traffic almost all the way to Portsmouth, we didn't arrive home until nearly seven. Before turning onto Opal, I eased up to the stop sign. Across the street, parked facing up the slight incline toward our house was a pickup with two men. The driver had the window rolled down, his tattooed forearm resting on the door. He glanced over and quickly turned to say something to the other man, pulling his arm back into the cab. As I rounded the corner onto Opal, I couldn't see either man's face, and their truck began backing up. It struck

me as mildly odd, and right before swinging into our driveway I glanced back through the rear view mirror. The pickup was gone.

Parked in our driveway was Lee McAllister's Volvo station wagon with his "I ♥ Morgans" bumper sticker. On seeing us, he clambered out of his car and greeted us warmly, kissing Jen on the cheek. A growth of beard darkened his face, and black half-moons cupped his eyes. I wondered what had brought him back to New Hampshire so quickly, especially appearing the way he did. It didn't take me long to find out.

With the house closed up all day, it was cooler in than out, and we stayed in the family room. He asked, "Have you heard anything more about Saturday?"

"Only that the Maine State Police still think it was a robbery," I answered.

He shook his head slightly and arched his eyebrows.

I asked, "Have you found out anything? Do you know who tried to shoot us?"

"Not yet." Lee paused for a few beats. "But if my hunch is right, it may be a lot bigger than the Posse and Mistral."

"Bigger than the Posse?" Jen asked.

"Mistral's death and the Posse could lead me right to the top of the horse world. Yesterday and today, I did a ton of research and made a ton of phone calls. I finally caught a break."

I asked, "I don't want to pry, but aren't you going to let us in on whatever it is you're after?"

Pensive for a moment, Lee didn't answer my question. Then conversationally, he asked, "Have you happened to find your niece's hank of Mistral's hair?"

"No," I said. "And after Saturday, I've pretty much given up."

He cracked his first smile, a thin, wry one. "I don't blame you."

“Why are you so interested in Mistral’s hair?” Jen asked.

He glanced over at Jen, who had parked her wheelchair at the end of the picnic table.

“It might confirm some thoughts I have.”

“Like what? Some kind of poison?” I asked.

He considered my question for a second or two. “Yes ... yes,” he agreed. “A toxicologist might be able to find trace amounts of a poison. You know, a slow-acting poison.”

Jen connected the dots faster than me. “Is someone else after the hair?”

“Could be,” Lee admitted. He rubbed his tired looking eyes, almost like a child trying to hide his face.

Jen cocked her head and studied him. “Brittany falling off her horse, it might not have been an accident?”

“Hold on,” he warned, holding up his hands to slow her down. “I wouldn’t jump to any conclusions. Really.”

But suspicions and hunches were on the loose in my imagination as well. I recalled Lee asking how good a rider Brittany was. And Jen, knowing the destructive power of an nine year old, had carefully tied the plume of horsehairs to Brittany’s helmet so it wouldn’t come off. Yet it had come off, and there was no trace of it. If the fall had dislodged the plume, wouldn’t it, with its blue ribbon, have been clearly visible against the sawdust and sand? Wouldn’t someone have picked it up and put it with Brittany’s belongings?

“But it’s a possibility?” Jen continued.

Lee breathed deeply and let the air out slowly. “It’s a possibility.”

As disturbing as my speculations were, they seemed too wild to be credible, and I tried to put them aside.

Jen's face clouded with concern. "Maybe we should call the police." A strand of her dirty blond hair lay at the nape of her neck, showing up in bright contrast to her navy blue shirt.

"You can if you want, but don't draw me in. As weak as my hunch is, it's not something I'm going to share with the cops."

"All right," I said. "We won't pester you anymore, but only on the condition that you keep in touch and tell us everything later."

"That's a deal," he said, relieved to be off the hot seat.

"Will you stay for supper and spend the night," Jen invited. "Tonight we can offer you a lot better meal."

I reached over to dust the hair off the back of Jen's shirt. She mouthed thanks.

"I'm going to take a pass," Lee replied. "Thanks anyhow. I've got one other fellow I want to see here in New Hampshire, and then I'm heading for home. Tomorrow, I leave first thing in the morning for Lexington, Kentucky."

"Hold it," I said. "I may know where some of Mistral's mane hair might still be."

Lee's head snapped around. I explained that on the morning Mistral died I told Brittany to hide the hank of his mane in her knapsack. "Last Friday, after Jen had been with Brittany at the hospital, there was a horsehair on her shoulder. Remember," I said to Jen, "I swept it off on our way to Fanueil Hall. And there were a couple of horsehairs stuck to Brittany's backpack. It's possible that some of Mistral's mane hairs may still be inside it. God knows, I don't think she's ever cleaned it."

A small smile brightened Lee's weary visage. Before he could say anything, I said, "If I can get you the hair, then you have to tell us what your hunch is." I was semi-joking.

But Lee didn't know that. His smile evaporated, and his face turned hard. "If that's the deal, then I don't want the horsehair."

“He doesn’t mean it,” Jen explained. “We’re just dying of curiosity.”

Lee locked her in his gaze. “That’s exactly what I don’t want to happen.”

My imagination started churning again, but it stopped every time I got to Brittany. I just couldn’t envision anyone wanting to hurt her. To quiet my mind, I made a silent vow to myself that if it was true, someone was going to pay.

Sal had gone back to work Monday, probably with his cell phone, but I dialed it anyhow, hoping he might have left it with Barbara at Mass General. As it turned out, he had driven down to the hospital that afternoon and answered my call from there. I supplied him a short explanation of why Lee wanted Mistral’s hair for his investigation, and that I thought some might be stuck inside Brittany’s knapsack. As I talked to him, I could hear my conscience in the background, lecturing me that the hank of hair might be the cause of Brittany’s injuries. I only hoped and prayed it wasn’t true. Without questioning me, Sal said he’d go look and call me right back.

During the next three minutes we barely talked. Lee’s nervousness was almost palpable. Right before the phone rang, he said, “In a funny way, I almost hope there isn’t any.”

I picked the phone up on the second ring. “There are plenty horsehairs stuck to Brittany’s knapsack and everything else that she’s jammed into it.”

I signaled thumbs-up to Lee. Into the phone I said, “He’s headed back to New York tonight. Would you mind if he stopped at the hospital on his way and picked up whatever horsehair you might have?”

Wednesday

At the luncheon recess there was a message to call a “Sherry MacAlaster.” With that spelling the name didn’t ring a bell. Neither did the area code.

The second she said her name out loud I made the connection. Her voice was hesitant and hushed. “I’m sorry to bother you. I’m sure you’re very busy.”

I glanced down at my pita sandwich and peach. “Not really.”

She paused for a moment. “Lee said he was going to visit with you on yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“Did he say where he was going after he left?” Her tone carried a combination of hope and dread.

“He said he was driving back to Long Island, that he had a plane to catch the next morning.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Has something happened?” I asked.

There was a long silence. I could hear her gulp quietly. “I haven’t seen him since yesterday morning when he left.”

“Oh no,” I blurted, wishing I hadn’t sounded so upset. “You haven’t heard anything?”

“Not a word. He left here early in the morning for New Hampshire. Said he wanted to see you and interview someone else, and that he wouldn’t be back until late last night.”

My antennae came onto high alert. “Did he say why he was coming to New Hampshire?”

“I’m not sure I should tell you.”

I thought for a second. “Let me try it this way. I met your husband this past weekend. My wife and I were with him when we were all attacked at the knacker’s.”

“I know,” she said. “He told me you saved his life. I’m very grateful.” She uttered several soft sobs, barely audible over the line.

“We were all in a tough slot. I’m not sure I did anything that your husband wouldn’t have done,” I said. “Anyhow, after this gunfight, he told my wife and me that he was investigating the death of a Thoroughbred named Mistral. He believed the horse might have been killed for the insurance.”

“That’s the case he’s been working on.”

“Have you called the police?”

“Not yet. I thought I’d call you and see if he was still in New Hampshire.”

I related Lee’s meeting with us, his desire to obtain some of Mistral’s mane hair, and explained how I’d set him up to meet my brother at Mass General. “I haven’t talked to my brother, but I could call him to see if Lee made it to hospital.”

“Could you do that?”

“Glad to,” I answered, taking down her phone number. “Did he tell you anything about his investigation?”

There was another pause. “No,” she said.

I had the sense that she knew something and didn’t want to tell. I didn’t press. We left it that I would call her if Lee hadn’t met Sal or if I heard anything, and she would do likewise. I also recommended that she file a missing person report, which she said she’d do.

* * *

I immediately called Sal’s cell phone. He was at work. “He seemed really pleased,” he said. “I emptied out Brittany’s backpack. Probably for the first time ever. There were horsehairs on everything. I found at least twenty-five. McAllister was able to tell—don’t ask me how—

which ones belonged to Mistral. There were about dozen of those. The rest he threw away right at the hospital.”

“Thanks for helping out. I know he appreciates it.”

“Why is this guy so hot about Mistral’s hair?”

“Something to do with insurance,” I answered, not wanting to alarm Sal. “He didn’t tell us much.”

“He wouldn’t tell me anything. Real secretive like.”

“Same with us.”

“Tony, hold on for a second. Let me close my door. ... Okay. Does McAllister think this horsehair has anything to do with what happened to Brittany?”

I swallowed my Adam’s apple, wondering if Sal could hear it going down. “No, I don’t think so. Why? Did he say something that made you think that?”

“No, but he was jumpier than a grasshopper. I just wonder if Mistral’s hair was all that important and someone knew Brittany had it. ...Well, it sort of makes you wonder.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, except we got to know McAllister pretty well, and he didn’t intimate anything like that to us.” I felt guilty about not telling my brother the truth, but Lee had said it was only a possibility, I rationalized, and without more I wasn’t about to share that piece of speculation. Still, I didn’t feel very good about it.

“Well, it all seemed kind of funny, what with all the cloak and dagger shit.”

“Yeah, it’s the old insurance-adjuster-who-wants-to-be-a-cop syndrome,” I glibly responded.

Sal chuckled and then asked, “Have you heard from him?”

“Not recently. Why do you ask?” My hand tightened on the handset.

“The guy looked beat, really burned out, and said he was on his way to Long Island. I don’t see how he could have made it being that tired.”

* * *

Leaving my pita sandwich and peach untouched, I walked down two floors to the staff lunchroom, occupied mainly by bailiffs. LL preferred my chambers, but if he’d finished with my Coastal Courier, he would often go downstairs to scrounge a Boston paper off someone else. He sat at the circular Formica table with the Herald spread out in front of him.

I motioned at his paper lunch sack, recycled so often that it was as soft and flexible as chamois. “How many times have you used that bag?”

He held it up, a grin rising from the corners of his lips. “I don’t know. I should date-stamp it, you know, for scientific purposes.” He opened a small plastic container of mashed potatoes.

I said, “Would you mind bringing it up to my chambers. I want your help.”

Seated at my desk, I quickly reiterated what little I knew about Lee McAllister’s hunch. “He basically inferred that it was too dangerous for us to know.”

Reopening his container of mashed potatoes, LL harrumphed his view of that. Of course, he operated on the premise that no secret was too good to keep.

I was prepared for his opinion, having saved the best for last. “I just got off the phone with his wife. He never came home and she hasn’t seen nor heard from him since yesterday morning.”

Pushing a full mouth of mashed potatoes out of his tongue’s way, he mumbled, “Jesus Christ.”

“Could you work your connections to see if any department between Boston and Long Island has got an unidentified body or accident victim?”

Most of my hearings Wednesday afternoon were quick-hitters: temporary child support, probation violations, plea and sentences, and structuring conferences, none of which went on long enough to allow me to concentrate on the McAllisters’ problems. Still, at every lull I would speculate over what he might have learned and if that knowledge was behind his disappearance.

A few minutes before three o’clock, when I normally take the afternoon recess, LL peeked into the courtroom, letting me know he wanted to see me. It wasn’t until several minutes later that I was finally able to break free from my hearing. I found him on the telephone at my desk.

Seeing me, he said into the phone, “Have to go, but thanks. I may be back in touch....You, too.” He set the phone back in its cradle.

“Any word?” I asked.

“Nothing. I checked Mass., Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, and to be on the safe side, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. No recent unidentified bodies. Nothing.”

“His wife said she’d call me if she heard anything. A husband with a wife and three daughters doesn’t not call home.”

* * *

Right after that I started a hearing on a motion by the State to offer as evidence in an upcoming arson trial, that the defendant had burned two other buildings using similar techniques—candles floating on pans of gasoline warming on the stove. Modus operandi evidence is not easily admitted into a trial, and the hearing totally preoccupied me until late that

afternoon when the lawyers concluded with short pitches on why their view of the law and evidence was correct.

I had completely forgotten to call Nurse Dan at Doctor Parker's office. Since I'd be home before five and to avoid someone flying into my chambers during the conversation, I elected to wait until then to telephone for the results.

* * *

Still trying to wash away her disappointment, Jen was cleaning her Toyota RAV4 in the driveway when I turned in. I started to roll down the window when Jen aimed the stream of water at me. A few splashes made it onto my sport coat. "Sorry," she hollered. "I couldn't resist. Leave your car there. I'll do yours when I'm done."

I stepped out with my hands in the air. "You want to run and roll after?" I asked.

"Sure."

"Let me change and I'll help you finish up." I kissed her hello and walked toward the breezeway door. A cool blast of water hit my back, and I ran the rest of the way to safety.

"Thanks," I responded to her laughter, taking off my soaked sports jacket.

In a way I was grateful she was outside. For some reason I wanted to be alone when I spoke to Doctor Parker's office. Still dressed in wet pants and shirt I called from our bedroom. The receptionist put me through to Nurse Dan, who said Doctor Parker wanted to talk to me personally. It took several seconds to get her on the line, and a number of thoughts ran through my mind. Maybe my sperm was so spectacular she wanted to study it further and publish a short article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Italian Sperm: Myths and Realities*. On the other hand, when a doctor wants to speak to you personally, it's never good news.

“Mr. Paris,” she said in a tone you don’t want to hear from your physician, “your semen quality was not as good as we might have wished.”

“It wasn’t?” I felt as if my voice squeaked.

“This could be caused by a number of factors. If you were not abstinent for at least forty-eight hours that could account for the inferior results.” *Inferior? What had I gotten myself into?*

“That would include masturbation,” she added, suggesting that I might have fudged a bit in my answer to that question. I was too stunned to argue. I’m sure she’d had this conversation hundreds of times, because she kept right on talking. “Don’t take these results too seriously.”

Easy for you to say. “We need a couple more tests to confirm that this one is accurate.”

“What exactly is the problem?”

“Some of the possibilities we discussed. Your sperm count is low, the motility is only fair, and over half the sperm were short-tailed or two-tailed.”

Two-tailed? “What does that mean in practical terms?”

“The good news is that you’re subfertile.” *This is good news?* “It shows a low baseline, but there are lots of things we can do to improve the chances of conception.” *Oh, great! Can’t wait.*

Doctor Parker paused for me to say something, but I couldn’t. My mind was reeling. She continued, “I still need to examine your wife, but presuming her tests are normal, there’s no reason that natural intercourse won’t eventually work, but if not, we can consider IUI and even IVF or ZIFT.”

I was still speechless.

“I’ll connect you to our receptionist to schedule an appointment for both of you in a couple of weeks. We’ll do another semen analysis at that time, but in the meantime, don’t be discouraged. There’s still a fair chance that you and Jen can become pregnant.”

“Yeah,” I muttered.

“Don’t forget, complete abstinence for forty-eight hours in advance of the next test.”

“Sure, sure,” I agreed, wishing I could make her believe that I had not been secretly spilling my precious seed and lying to her about it. While I was on hold waiting for the receptionist, I hung up.

I sat there dumbstruck. Me! I was the problem. My—what did she call it—my “not-as-good-a-quality-as-we-might-have-hoped” sperm was the reason Jen couldn’t get pregnant.

I couldn’t believe it. I giggled to myself, recalling my attempt to buy my first condom and then losing my nerve at the checkout counter, the box of Trojans still in my clammy hand. My high school girlfriend and I worrying sick whenever her period was a day late. And now, now it was all for naught. All those years I was sterile, shooting blanks. I smiled and an ironic chuckle snuck out.

* * *

Without changing my clothes I went directly to the driveway. I wanted to get this over as soon as possible. “I got the results from Boston.”

Jen swung her wheelchair around. “And?”

I stared back at her blankly as conscious thoughts and words suddenly vanished.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

I shook my head, hoping to snap out of this bad dream. But Jen was still there, appraising me expectantly. “The test results were no good. The sperm count’s low, and what few are left are either defective or lousy swimmers, two-tailed, no-tail, short-tailed, I don’t know.”

“Oh Tony, I am so sorry.” She wheeled over for a hug.

“*You’re* sorry.”

She held onto me until I finally had to straighten up. When I did, she said, “Well, it just goes to show that we’re all handicapped in some way.”

A year or so after her accident, when things between us hadn’t been so good, Jen would repeat this silly adage like a self-help mantra. At the time I had dismissed it, feeling that the notion only beguiled her into believing that she was the same as everyone else. Back then I perceived it as wishful fantasy, a dream that only diverted her from honestly addressing her limitations, learning to adjust to them, and making peace with herself. But now...but now she was right, I had my own handicap, just as real as Jen’s but a lot less obvious.

“What else did she say?”

“Well, according to her, there’s still a chance.”

* * *

I no longer felt like running, and Jen suggested we go fishing instead. The Piscataqua River was as blue as the sky and the air was crisp and dry. Jen held our Boston Whaler steady against the incoming tide while I cast for stripers.

“You want another soda?” I asked, setting my rod down and grabbing my third beer out of the cooler.

“No, thanks.”

I pointed at an eddy about a hundred yards ahead of us. “Why don’t we try our luck up there?”

Jen pushed the throttle down, and we cut into the strong current. “I’m sorry about the test results,” she said.

One of the reasons I like fishing is because you can’t concentrate on it and your problems at the same time. Until then I had managed to banish my spermatozoic shortcomings

from my mind. “Yeah, I’m disappointed, too. For both of us,” I added diplomatically, knowing how important it was to her.

“There are other options.”

“The doctor mentioned them, IUD and IVF.”

Jen’s granite-green eyes sparkled in the sunlight. “TUI, not IUD. That’s an intrauterine device for birth control.”

I wagged my head. “Women have more abbreviated euphemisms than the Army. It’s like a riot of acronyms. Ob-gyn, IUD, TTC, BDF. Whatever the hell happened to a good old-fashioned F-U-C-K?”

“Well, sometimes a nice F-U-C-K doesn’t work,” Jen teased.

She had me there, and I flashed a smile of surrender. “Yeah.”

“TUI is where they wash and concentrate your sperm and then put it in me when I’m most fertile. In vitro fertilization is when they fertilize the egg in a petri dish and then plant it in my uterus.”

“Sounds like the biology class got lost and ended up in the chemistry lab.”

A crooked grin emerged. “It can’t be any worse than what we’ve been going through.”

I didn’t want to seem to agree too heartily with that statement and uttered a bland, “Uh-huh.”

Jen idled the Whaler forward, and I made my first cast into a whirling eddy.

“There is another alternative if those fail,” she said.

Adoption, I thought. She was actually thinking about adoption. I had mentioned it in the past, but Jen was always so intent on getting pregnant she wouldn’t consider it. To me it seemed like the perfect solution. Put our name in at Catholic Charities, pick out a baby, and voilà, we’re parents. That she was even considering adoption made me optimistic that our

medical assault on conception might be coming to an end. “That might be a really good option.”

Jen looked surprised. “You mean DI wouldn’t bother you?”

“DI? What the hell is DI?”

“Donor insemination.”

My arm dropped in midcast, laying a snarl of fish line onto the water. “Donated sperm?” I blurted out. “I thought we were talking about adoption.”

“No,” she responded, as surprised by the twist in the conversation as I was. “With adoption you don’t know whose genes you’re getting. With donated sperm at least the baby would be half ours.”

“Geez, I don’t know,” I replied, trying to collect myself.

“DI would be a last resort, anyhow. And I shouldn’t have brought it up now. Doctor Parker warned that the idea makes most men real nervous at first. They have counseling and everything,” Jen said sweetly.

I set my beer in the holder and started to unsnarl my line. *Donated sperm?*

* * *

When we docked at my sister’s on Sagamore Creek, it was after dark. From the porch Lucy called down, inviting us in for some dessert. We sat at the dining room table eating strawberry-rhubarb pie. Sable, Lucy and John’s five year old, sat in my lap. Three-year-old Jack careened around the table, as Lucy constantly interrupted our conversation to give him baby-talk instructions. She was so large that it was an effort to lift herself out of her chair, and when she stood, she cradled her swollen stomach, as if to help hold it up. I could see Jen eyeing it enviously, and was relieved when we said our farewells forty-five minutes later.

On the way home I recounted Sherry McAllister's call.

"Oh my god, that's terrible. Three girls." Her eyes moistened. "Do you think it has anything to do with Mistral?"

"I do. I don't know what the connection is, but it's just too suspicious. LL called the state police in every state between here and Long Island and a couple of extras just to make certain, and they had nothing."

Jen was pensive for second, resting her head in her hand. "If that's right, then Brittany's fall might not be an accident."

"If Mistral's hair contained some slow-acting poison," I replied, "there would be nineteen and a half million reasons to want to get it back." I could feel a ball of anger building in my gut, a hard, warm knot.

"Shouldn't you give all this to the police?"

"I thought about that," I said. "But by now Lee's wife has already reported that he's missing. Plus, there's absolutely no evidence of foul play involving Brittany. We've got nothing to tell the police other than a sequence of odd occurrences that may be linked together, and the only person who might be able to tie them all up has vanished. Another thing—" I ran my hands back through my hair "—I never got around to telling the police about the attack on Brittany, and with all that's been happening, there hasn't been a good time to let Sal and Barbara know. Reporting it now will only make things worse for them."

"Tony, you said you were going to. You promised."

"I know, honey. It's just ... I don't know. I wasn't certain back then that she wasn't making it all up."

"Well, when are you planning on telling them?"

"Not right now. They don't need this."

Jen shook her head in dismay. I didn't really have anything more to say in my own defense.

In the garage before we exited the car, she said, "You know, if Aero Dynamique was tripped by a rope or wire, it might very well have left a cut or an abrasion."

"I suppose so."

"And if the horse has a cut or abrasion, at least you'd have something to report to the police."

"And if she doesn't have any marks?"

"Well, at least you'll know that."

I pondered the idea for a second. It made sense, and then it didn't. "I can't just waltz down to Bartholow Farms and say, 'Do you mind if I examine my niece's horse? I've got some serious suspicions about you guys.'"

"Well," Jen deadpanned, "that would be one way to do it, but I was thinking of something a little more subtle. I could drop by the farm tomorrow and say that Brittany wanted me to pay a visit on Aero to see how the horse was doing. I'll take an apple or carrots or something," Jen said. "To make it look legit."

* * *

Our bed felt foreign to me, like a strange playground where you know that no one will pick you for the team. Jen's period had ended, which usually spurred us to celebrate our short abstinence. But that night, she read in bed until she turned off the light and rolled over to kiss me goodnight. "I love you," she said. "Don't obsess about this. One person obsessing about pregnancy in a household is enough, believe me."

I chuckled. "I won't." But I did. Stirring and shifting, I couldn't get to sleep. Bizarre thoughts swam through my mind. With black humor I counted imaginary sperm to bore myself to sleep, but stopped when I reached seventeen, laughing to myself darkly that there were no more to count. I tried to picture a no-tailed sperm. A beach ball of DNA bouncing off everything it touched. I imagined twin-tailed sperms, their fins identical to the prongs on the Devil's pitchfork.

Would I have gotten laid more, I wondered, handing prospective targets a line emphasizing my personal sterility, tossing in a dash of self-pity. "You see, I can't ever have children...of course it makes me sad...very sad (hangdog face). But on the brighter side no one will get pregnant going to bed with me."

I finally got up and watched television until three a.m.

Thursday

When I broke for lunch, there were two messages on my desk: one to call Jen, the other from a Lieutenant Ambruso, Maywood Police Department, Long Island. I called his number first.

“Ambruso,” he growled in what I took to be a studied imitation of a TV cop answering the phone. After brief introductions, he explained that he was working on the missing person case of Lee McAllister. “I understand he paid you a visit Tuesday evening.”

“Yes,” I answered, and then in response to a series of questions, I outlined meeting Lee at the knacker’s, the shoot-out, and his returning to our house, looking for some of Mistral’s hair.

“Do you know why?”

“He was investigating whether the horse was killed for the insurance, as I’m sure you know—”

“Yeah,” he interrupted impatiently.

“And he thought the hairs might reveal the presence of a slow-acting poison.” I went on to tell him that Sal had gathered some hairs from Brittany’s backpack, that Lee had stopped by Mass General to pick them up on his way home, and that my brother was the last person, as far as I knew, who had seen him.

“Do you know who he planned to visit after he left your house?” he asked.

“He didn’t say. In fact, he was kind of secretive about the whole thing. He intimated that he was onto something bigger than Mistral’s death and the Posse, but he was pretty tight-lipped about the whole thing.”

“The Posse?”

I repeated what Lee had told me.

“Do you have any idea why he was flying to Cincinnati the next day?”

That surprised me. “He told me he was traveling to Lexington, Kentucky.”

“Was it part of his investigation?”

“Sounded that way to me,” I answered.

Right after giving Ambruso my home phone number and promising to contact him if I heard anything, I telephoned Jen.

“Did you know Aero had been euthanized?” she asked as soon as I came on the line.

“No.”

“She broke a leg in the fall and had to be put down.”

“You know I’ve been down there twice since her fall, and no one said anything to me.”

“The farm manager, a guy named Stevie Holmes, said he spoke to Sal as soon as they got back to the States to get their permission.”

“That seems awfully quick, doesn’t it?”

“You’d think so, but he explained how it limits the horse’s suffering. He seemed real sincere and very concerned about Brittany. On the flip side, it’s one more thing that disappeared. Very weird.”

“Very.” It all sounded so logical, so innocent, yet McAllister was still missing, and Brittany was lying in a hospital bed, with no feeling in her legs and stuttering her words.

“Are you going to contact the police?” she asked.

“I just got off the phone with a Lieutenant Ambruso from Long Island. He’s working on it, and I told him everything I know.”

“Did you tell him about Brittany’s fall?”

“No,” I admitted. “It’s the same problem. I just don’t want to bother Sal and Barbara with all this. Not yet. Besides, I don’t have anything to report. Without Lee and whatever he

discovered, I've got nothing. No hair. No horse. No evidence. I don't see any point. All it'll do is upset Sal and Barbara.”

“I still think we should do something.”

* * *

When LL came by my chambers to prepare for the afternoon list, I told him about my conversations with Jen and Ambruso. He leaned back in the chair, hands behind his head, and listened, his eyes blankly gazing into the distance. When I was finished, he leaned back in my desk chair, hands behind his head. “Who? What? Where? When? How? and Why? We know the what, Mistral, the where, Bartholow Farms, and the when, fifteen days ago. Lee McAllister must have uncovered the rest.”

“Thank you. Will there be a quiz anytime soon?”

“Don't be dissin' the old master. I think I've got the why.”

“That's easy. The insurance money.”

“That's surmise, not proof.” LL said, rising to prepare the courtroom for my first case.

I idly flipped through the file for my first case, a high profile plea and sentencing for negligent homicide, but my thoughts were with Brittany and her parents. Did someone really accost her on the trail? And did someone trip her horse? Nearly causing her death, maiming her for life? All for a few strands of horsehair? I closed my eyes for a second, picturing her.

I didn't hear LL, and his voice startled me. “Your fans await.”

I put on my robe, grabbed the case file, and dashed across the hall to the courtroom. One side of the courtroom was packed with friends and family of the defendant. The defendant, a stay-at-home mother of three children, eleven, nine, and five, had killed her oldest

girl and one of her young friends, an only child, in an automobile crash. Her blood alcohol had been point two-three, nearly three times the legal limit.

On the other side of the room, behind the County Attorney, sat the victim's parents with only the victim-witness coordinator to keep them company. The case had been all over the Coastal Courier, which was why Bill Powers was handling it.

As soon as he stood to speak, LL, after giving the other bailiff a signal that he was leaving, crept out of the courtroom.

The County Attorney was asking for no less than six years in the women's prison. He spoke with a preacher's conviction and peppered his comments with hackneyed but powerful images: we must stop the carnage on our highways; what is the price of a child's life; we must send a message that will deter others. Although they tried, the victim's mother and father's grief was inexpressible, which made their loss even more incalculable.

Then the defendant's supporters began. Her husband, a construction foreman, admitted that they had both been heavy drinkers, but neither had touched a drop since the accident. His wife, a lapsed Catholic, had returned to her faith, attending mass every day. Her guilt and sorrow had dropped her into a full-blown clinical depression. Just looking at her confirmed that diagnosis. Her face was ashen and lifeless and deep circles surrounded her eyes.

When she finally spoke, her crying nearly drowned her words. I'd heard the sentiments before, although no one could have been more heartfelt than she was. "What I did was terrible. I live with it every day of my life. I'll never do it again. I'd like to speak to high schools about my experience. Punish me, if you will, but please don't punish my children and my husband. By that time, her tears were flowing like a river and in sympathy my eyes began to moisten. Her youngest, a darling boy, dressed in black jeans, blue shirt and necktie, spontaneously ran out of

the gallery to comfort her. She stopped speaking and squatted down to console her son. At that point the only dry eyes were the County Attorney and her victim's parents.

I imposed the County Attorney's recommendation of six years. It broke my heart, but there was no choice. Society has rules; they're known and clear. Apologies and promises made after the crime, however genuine, cannot excuse what she did. It consoled me at least that she had a responsible husband, and I wasn't condemning her children to a foster home for the rest of their upbringing. I could hear the sobbing and wailing as I left.

* * *

A string of drenching thunderstorms rumbled through most of the afternoon. As soon as I backed out of my parking space, the rain pelted the car as noisily as marbles. The windows fogged up, and I slowed down until the air conditioner caught up.

LL shifted in the car seat so his back was partially against the door. "You may be interested in learning that Bartholow Farms isn't as goldplated as everyone thinks."

"Get out of here. There was a cover article in Forbes magazine about how successful it is."

"Forbes? Never heard of it," he said. "My info is firsthand. I've been talking to some of my investment people."

"Investment people!" I laughed out loud. "Who the hell are you shitting?"

"What, just because I'm not a college guy doesn't mean I can't have investment people."

"Who? Those nice ladies down at the credit union?"

"No, Wall Street types."

“You’re too cheap to let go of your money long enough to invest in a three-month CD.”

“So,” he replied petulantly, “I can still have investment advisors.”

“Okay,” I said, relenting a little, “what did your so-called investment gurus tell you?”

“That Bartholow is in deep financial doo-doo.”

“Can’t be. The article in Forbes said Bartholow’s was one of the best run privately held companies in America. Hell, if I’d had any money at the time, I would’ve been tempted to invest.”

“Old news. His syndicates haven’t been turning a profit for years. He’s kept the operation afloat by starting new syndications and then having them buy horses from his older partnerships. If it was bank accounts, I’d say he was kiting paper. This is more like a rich guy’s Ponzi scheme. But without any champions the well is drying up fast. Going public was a last ditch effort to raise more money, but that all went to pay debts. They’re bleeding cash and desperate.”

* * *

Since her accident Jen never wore anything other than long pants and skirts, but that day it was so steamy inside and out that she had on a pair of baggy blue cotton shorts.

I was in our bedroom changing me clothes. “LL called ‘his investment people—’ ” I made quotation marks with my fingers “—and they tell him that Bartholow Farms is not doing well financially. Apparently they haven’t returned a profit for their investors in years. That’s a pretty good motive to do away with a horse for insurance.”

“But I thought they made millions from breeding Mistral. It would be sort of like killing the goose who lays the golden eggs.” She looked up. “Maybe they didn’t kill Mistral. Maybe they killed another horse and said it was him.”

“I was there. It was Mistral.”

“But you didn’t know what he looked like.”

“No, but Brittany did, and so did all the farmhands and grooms.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, surrendering that idea.

I followed her down the hall and into the kitchen. “Something bad has happened to everyone who has possessed Mistral’s hair. McAllister’s missing. There’s nothing left of either the knacker or Mistral. And Brittany’s attacked and then her horse falls.”

“It’s horrible if it’s all true.”

“If someone deliberately tripped Brittany’s horse...” I halted, not wanting to articulate what I truly felt.

I rarely got angry, and when I did it was a violent, short-lived reaction to some trigger. There was a dark part of me that was capable of a terrifying fury. It had come over me a few times in high school football games when I would play like a madman, wanting to obliterate my opponents. Coach would always praise me, trying to encourage me to play at that level all the time. But I couldn’t. My fury was so ungovernable it scared me. I got thrown out of two games. Once for forearming a receiver unconscious and the other time for stomping my cleats into the calf of a running back already on the ground. My fuse was long, but once it reached the nitro in my gut, the explosion was beyond my control.

Jen poured herself a glass of fruit punch, and I grabbed a can of beer. “It’s too hot to cook,” she said.

“I can make a salad if you want,” I offered, and began gathering vegetables from the fridge.

Jen parked her wheelchair at the kitchen counter, next to where I was chopping and tossing. With her hand she wiped the ring of condensed water that her glass made. She looked up at me. “I know you, and it seems to me that you’ve got two choices. Do nothing and drive yourself crazy.” A slip of a grin appeared. “And we’ve already got enough nutcases in this house. Or you can try to find out what happened. Maybe there’s an innocent explanation for all of this.”

“Maybe,” I said.

I thought of Brittany lying in the hospital, looking forward to a day when her life would return to normal. A day that might never come. I imagined her, the way she had been the day she was injured, astride her horse, a beautiful, innocent girl, her satiny ponytail flying, her face glowing with pleasure.

Then, someone pulls a rope taut. The horse stumbles and starts to fall. Brittany swallows her smile, and terror replaces joy. She hurtles to the ground. A hoof flashes out, striking her head. Someone—Jason Klingman?—rushes to help her. But first, he rips a harmless memento off her helmet and stuffs it into his pocket.

I had to do something. “I’m going to call Sherry McAllister. See if she knows any more.”

She wasn’t there, and I left a message with whoever answered the phone. By the time we went to bed, she hadn’t returned our call.

Friday

Ralph had scheduled me for an all day divorce case on Friday, the perfect way to end the week. The lawyers appeared in my chambers shortly after nine and, explaining they were close to a permanent stipulation, asked for more time. I agreed and returned to reading the newspaper.

At eleven the divorce attorneys informed Ralph that they couldn't reach an agreement on anything and that we would have to rush to finish the evidence by the end of the day. Since it was a marital case, I only had one bailiff as opposed to two in criminal cases. The reasoning of the powers that be is that a criminal defendant—who would have been repeatedly searched before being brought into the courtroom—was a lot more dangerous to the judge than a psychotic parent, frantic about losing custody of his or her children.

The couple had been married nearly thirty years, had launched their children into successful careers, and had accumulated a nice lifestyle. He was a tenured professor at UNH with a substantial retirement account. She had started a catering business early in their marriage, which had grown spectacularly since, in large part fueled by the boom along the seacoast. She had purchased a banquet hall, where companies held their conferences and parents their children's wedding. The professor still lived in the marital home in Dover while the wife had moved into their condo overlooking Portsmouth Harbor. Her income was slightly more than his, but his retirement was more valuable than her business. The house and condo were nearly equal in value.

After listening for less than hour, I called counsel, both women and excellent attorneys, into my chambers.

“What the hell are we fighting about here?” I demanded. “It's a long-term marriage; their income and assets are nearly equal; it's a fifty/fifty split. What's going on?”

The women glanced at one another. “You want me to tell him?” one asked.

“Doesn’t make any difference.”

“Judge, we knew you’d call us in here sooner or later. To be honest, one of our clients is a complete asshole. Wants seventy-five percent of everything, and then a quart of blood, and after that a pound of flesh.”

The other agreed, “You can’t imagine. Between us—” she motioned at her colleague “—we’ve had this case settled a dozen times, and this morning we really thought we had a stip, but the whole thing blew up again.”

The other attorney said, “And no offense, judge, but we decided between ourselves that it wouldn’t be fair to let you know who has the jerk for a client. You may guess. And one of us hopes you will, but we’re not going to tell you.”

Smiling at their conspiracy to do justice despite one of their clients, the two women kept their secret and returned to trying the case. I never did learn which one was the asshole.

* * *

Sherry McAllister had returned my call early Friday afternoon while I was in court. I tried her during the afternoon recess without luck. Then she called me back while I was back in court. I finally caught up with her late that afternoon, before I left for home. Apologizing for not getting in touch with me the previous evening, she explained that her oldest daughter was in a summer acting troupe and the whole family had gone to opening night.

Waiting a respectful second, I asked, “I gather that you haven’t heard anything new about Lee?”

She hesitated a moment before answering. “No, I haven’t.”

I felt as if I were intruding on something intimate. “Detective Ambruso called me yesterday. Said he’s looking into his disappearance.”

There was a derisive hiss. “If you want to call it that.”

“Really?”

“He wanted to know—nicely of course—if I suspected Lee of having a girlfriend.”

“You’re kidding!”

“That was only the start. They wanted to know if Lee had withdrawn any large amounts of money recently? Did I think he might have a secret bank account someplace?” She began to sob softly, and I heard her gently blow her nose.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to upset you.”

“I’ll be all right,” she said with an uptick of firmness.

I hesitated, knowing the next question might upset her and knowing that by asking it, I was setting out on a track that I’d have no choice but to follow to the end. “I’m not certain, but I suspect the same bad guys responsible for Lee’s disappearance may have nearly killed my niece Brittany. I don’t know if he told you, but she had a clump of Mistral’s hair on her helmet. Last week her horse fell, seriously injuring her. And, although we’ve looked every possible place, the hair is gone. In fact, that’s what we were after when we first met Lee at the knacker’s. It seems everything connected to Mistral keeps disappearing.”

“Including Lee.”

“Yeah,” I responded.

“I’m terribly sorry about your niece.”

“You can understand now why I’m calling you. I’d like to get to the bottom of this for my own peace of mind.”

“I’m not sure there’s much I can do or even know, but I’ll be glad to help any way that I can.”

“Did the police ask you much about Mistral’s case?”

“Oh yes. I referred them to the Equine’s home office, told them about you. They wanted to look at Lee’s case file, but he had that with him.”

“Would he have an extra file at his office?”

“No,” she answered. “He mainly works out of his office here at home, and I already checked.”

“He told us he was going to Lexington, but Lieutenant Ambruso said his ticket was for Cincinnati.”

“It’s only about ninety miles from Lexington. It’s where Lee always flies into,” she explained.

“Oh,” I said, wishing I had looked at a map. The line was quiet for a second or two. I asked, “Do you happen to know who Lee called before he disappeared?”

“The police asked the same question, and I signed a release for them to obtain our phone records. They gave me a copy to see if I recognized any of the numbers.”

“And did you?”

“Only our own when he called home from his car phone and Equine Assurance’s number.”

“Do you still have the numbers?”

“Yes, the lists are down in Lee’s office.”

“Could you fax them to me?”

“Sure, he has a fax machine in the basement.”

I read off our fax number. “Is there anything else he said that you can remember?”

“This probably isn’t much help because I really wasn’t paying much attention at the time, but when he left here Tuesday morning, he was real excited. Said he had an informant—I think it may have been the other person he was planning on seeing in New Hampshire—and that he thought he knew who killed Mistral.”

“Okay,” I said, wishing Lee had told us who he was going to visit after he left us. “If you think of anything else, let me know.”

“There is one other thing. I don’t even know if it was connected to what Lee was working on. I found a note in the telephone table. I don’t think it’s been there very long, and it does have a horse’s name on it.”

“What’d it say?” I asked.

“I can’t remember. It had some initials and the horse’s name, Macho something. Hold on, and I’ll go get it.”

Sherry came back onto the phone. “Here it is: ‘COF. Call. Machote—’ that’s the name of a horse, I think ‘—Someone inside J.C. Who?’ ”

I carefully copied it down. “And the rest of it doesn’t ring any bells with you?” I asked.

“No. Does it to you?”

* * *

While waiting for the fax, I began working on my decree in the divorce case. LL popped his head in, ready to go home. I explained about the fax from Sherry McAllister and asked if he’d go down to the clerk’s office to see if it had arrived. He left my office and two seconds later reappeared. Behind him, wearing the superior smirk of a missionary, came Margaret, holding some papers. LL moved out of her way and swept his arms to invite her in.

“These are for you,” she said, setting the papers down on the conference table out of my reach.

“Thank you.”

After dropping the sheets, Margaret remained, eyeing me as if I were a common criminal. “Judge Gigas has asked that we not tie up the facsimile machine with personal faxes. If you’d care to read it, the notice is posted on the bulletin board.”

“I’ll make a point of it next time I go by.”

* * *

There were two pages of telephone numbers: one was a list of calls made from Lee’s home office telephone, the other a list of numbers dialed from his cellular phone. We had barely exited the parking lot when LL stopped talking and began studying the two lists in earnest.

“There are four calls to New Hampshire,” he said, pointing them out. “Two Sunday afternoon. The first is to Portsmouth for four minutes, and two minutes later there’s another call to New Hampshire, to a different number. I don’t recognize the locality prefix. That one was for only a minute.” He traced his finger down the list of numbers. “Monday night there’s a second call to that number for ten minutes. And a third on Tuesday evening from his car phone.” LL shuffled the two pages to examine the list of calls from Lee’s home. “That was the last call he made to anyone.”

“What time did he make that one?” I asked.

“Seven-twenty-three. For one minute.”

“That had to have been right after he left our house. I’ll bet that call is to the person he was seeing after us.”

LL read off the first three numbers after the area code. “I don’t recognize the prefix. Do you?”

“No.”

LL went back to studying the two pages of telephone numbers. When I slowed to exit Route 101 for Interstate 95, he looked up. “There’s a clear pattern here. The calls from his car began Sunday morning. What time did he leave your house? Do you remember?”

“Probably around eight-thirty.” I stopped the car to toss tokens into the toll basket.

“Sounds right. His first call was to information, at eight-fifty-eight. He was calling all over the place. Look.” He pointed at some print that was too small to read even if we were sitting still. As it was, I was trying to merge onto 95 with a bunch of weekenders from Massachusetts barreling up the interstate at speeds NASCAR would outlaw, determined not to allow a single car into the travel lane ahead of them.

“Uh-huh,” I said.

“Kentucky seems to have the most, but there’s a bunch to California, Florida, Maryland, New York. And until Lee got back to Long Island, almost every one was preceded by a call for directory assistance.” LL shuffled the two pages. “He must have had access to the rest of the numbers at home, because there’s not a single request for information from his home telephone. Different numbers, as best I can tell, but the same states: Kentucky, New York—oh, here’s one to Delaware.”

LL buried his nose into the two sheets, circling his lips with his forefinger. “The calls taper off Monday afternoon and evening, and on Tuesday, there are a few, but that’s all.”

We were approaching the Portsmouth traffic circle, where one exit would take me to LL’s apartment and the next to our house on Opal. I asked, “Why don’t you come over for a

drink and dinner? You can try some good whiskey for a change and I'm sure Jen has enough dinner to go around."

"Naw, I have a very nice dinner planned."

"What? Homemade goulash, frozen to perfection last January? Probably a very good vintage for your goulash."

With a satisfied smile, LL sniffed the air and patted his stomach like a gourmand at a banquet.

"If you'd rather suck down lousy whiskey and eat year-old goulash by yourself, be my guest."

"Who says I'll be dining alone?" he replied, not contradicting my assumptions about his beverage and main course.

I slowed the car down. "Do you want to come or not?"

* * *

Jen had made a cold rice, bean, and shrimp salad, which LL pointedly praised as a very nice "casserole." We were seated around the milking table in the family room. The fax pages lay in front of us.

"I've been thinking about it all afternoon," Jen said. "It's the mane hair."

"Duh," I responded, and earned a quick frown.

"The hair is the common thread that connects everything, all the disappearances, the coincidences. McAllister wants to see Mistral's body, but before he gets there, it's gone, and so is the knacker. Brittany has a clump of the hair; it's gone and she's in the hospital." Jen glanced up at me. Although my face warmed, I showed no other reaction, and she continued, "Then Lee gets his hands on some more hair, and he vanishes."

LL said, "I know a little something about slow-acting poisons for humans, but I think most of them make you real sick." He asked me, "Was the horse healthy before he died?"

"I wouldn't have the foggiest idea."

Jen had spun the lists of numbers around so she could read them.

"My guess," LL went on, "is that the horse that died wasn't really Mistral. It was a phony whose coat was a different color than Mistral's or had been dyed."

Jen piped up, "That's what I said."

"Not bad if you can get away with it," LL said. "Kill a nag for nineteen and a half million and keep the real stallion for yourself."

"I was there," I said. "It was Mistral. I mean, I can't tell a Thoroughbred from a jackass, but a bunch of stable hands, grooms, trainers, you name it, were all there, crying and carrying on about Mistral. They couldn't all have been acting. And Brittany sure thought he was Mistral."

Setting the papers in her lap, Jen rolled over to her desktop computer on the other side of the family room.

"You wait; you'll see that I'm right," LL warned, rising and tinkling the ice cubes in his glass to indicate he was about to pour himself another three fingers of my Canadian Club.

Across the room, I watched the computer screen flip through web pages.

"Hey," Jen called without turning around. "Guess who the first New Hampshire number belongs to?"

"I don't know," I responded. "Surprise me."

"Bartholow Farms."

"I wonder who the hell he was calling there?" I asked.

Swirling his drink, LL ambled up behind Jen. She began clicking through more web pages. “Oh shoot, there’s no name associated with the second number.”

LL leaned forward to examine the screen more closely. “You can do a reverse look-up on that?”

“Sure,” Jen answered. “See.” She returned to the search engine and showed him how she did it.

“Well, I’ll be damned. I used to have to bribe someone at the telephone company for that info.”

* * *

“Why don’t we just call the number,” Jen suggested.

I was in the kitchen, putting the last few dishes in the dishwasher.

“Not a good idea,” LL replied. “That was the last number McAllister dialed. The call may very well have been the one that led to his ending up MIA. I wouldn’t want to leave your number on that person’s caller ID.”

“I’ll bet that telephone call was to the witness Lee was interviewing,” I said. “And after he was done there, he made it safely to Mass General. That makes me think that person didn’t do anything to hurt Lee.”

“Are you willing to bet your life?” LL lightened the gravity of his point by pretending to hold a cigar in a feeble imitation of Groucho Marx.

“Can you find out whose telephone number it is?” I asked him.

If informants, snitches, and sources were the currency of law enforcement, LL was the richest detective around. For thirty years he had cultivated sources, and it sometimes seemed to me that there wasn’t anything confidential he couldn’t get his hands on. I had once asked him,

when he was telephoning a source at a local bank to obtain some federally protected information about someone's account, if he'd gathered evidence the same way when he was chief of the State Police Major Crimes Unit.

"Absolutely not," he exclaimed, surprised by my ignorance. "We always got the junior generals (his way of referring to Assistant Attorney Generals) to prepare a search warrant and do the whole thing up nice and legal like. Of course, there was no point in going through all that paperwork unless you're sure what you wanted was going to be there."

Every time after that when I had case involving a search warrant, I always wondered if the search had preceded the warrant, "just to make sure the evidence would be there."

"Sure, but it'll take a little while. In the meantime, why don't we find a pay phone and call from there."

The Fox Run Mall was inland from us, less than a mile away. There were no convenient parking spaces so Jen dropped LL and me off at the main entrance and was going to circle until we came out. A hundred yards into the heart of the mall, we found a bank of pay phones. Not one was occupied. But with the proliferation of cell phones stuck to people's ears, I could understand why. Public phones would soon be as extinct as full service gas stations.

"What's that number again?" LL asked. As I read it off, he pressed the keys. Expectantly he waited, and then his expression soured with disappointment. He handed the phone to me. The computer-generated message cycled through again. "The subscriber you have called is unavailable at the present time or has traveled outside of the coverage area."

"Well, at least we know it's a cell phone."

"Yeah," LL grumbled. He looked at his watch. "Let's get back to your house to see if I can track this number down."

As we walked down the wide waxy corridor to the exit, I asked, "Can you really get that information on a Friday night?"

LL thought for a second. "It'll be a little harder, but sure." Then he smiled.

* * *

As soon as we got home, Jen took the lists of phone numbers and wheeled over to the computer. LL went directly to the telephone. Sitting on the sofa, his small spiral notepad on his knee, he began making whispered calls. Feeling pretty useless after a few minutes, I called Sal on my cell phone to see how they were all doing. I caught him in his car on the way home to Dover.

"You want to stop by here for a bite?" I asked. "We've got plenty of leftovers."

"No thanks. I have to pick up the boys. They've hardly been home, and I want to spend some time with them."

I asked about Brittany.

"She's definitely better. Some of the feeling and strength is returning to her legs. They're still not sure she'll ever be able to walk, but it appears that she may be able to use braces along with a rolling walker or forearm crutches." He paused for one second. "But I worry more about her cognitive loss than her legs. My God, my kid may never walk again, and I'm upset because she stutters."

"No improvement?" I asked.

"Not really, although she isn't confused any more when she wakes up, which is at least something. Another good thing: they're transferring her to the Seacoast Regional Rehabilitation Center in Stratham on Sunday. It'll be a lot easier on Barb and me, and hopefully she can start seeing more of her friends again."

He didn't mention that Seacoast Rehab was where Jen had spent six weeks when she finally got out of the hospital, although I knew it was on both our minds. We continued talking about family. Most of my brothers and sisters would be attending mass in New Hampshire, but some would be going to the hospital chapel in Boston. He didn't know yet who was going where, or who would be putting on Sunday dinner. Of course, I immediately recognized an opportunity to skip without anyone knowing unless they compared lists later.

"I may swing by and see Brittany on Monday after work," I said, as we finished our conversation.

* * *

While LL continued to whisper into the telephone and Jen looked up telephone numbers on the web, I turned on an Atlanta Braves game. When the Giants relief pitcher started to warm up, I went over to see what she was doing.

"Sixty-two telephone calls in two days," she said, holding the photocopied numbers. "I've looked up twelve of the numbers. Eight of the calls were to Thoroughbred stables or farms. Three even have web sites." She clicked the mouse a couple of times and up popped the picture of a foal and his mother grazing in a verdant field under the canopy of an enormous tree. The legend said, "Sheffield Stable, A Half Century of Service to the Thoroughbred Industry."

"Huh," I muttered, not sure what its significance was.

Jen tapped her mouse a few more times and a spreadsheet appeared on the computer. "I scanned the statements and converted them into a spreadsheet." Touching the screen, she said, "The first column is the date of the call, then the time, then the area code, followed by the number, and finally the length of the call. I'm not finished, but this way I can sort them anyway

I want,” she explained, pointing to the columns on her computer. “So far, I show he called eleven states. Kentucky has the most, twenty-three. Florida is next with twelve. Then California with nine.”

“Where’s Sheffield Stable?” I asked.

“Lexington, Kentucky.”

“That’s where he said he was headed on Wednesday.”

“I know. Almost all the Kentucky calls were to that area.”

About a half-hour later, a pleased grin decorating his face, LL asked, “Guess whose name that telephone number is in?”

“You found out?”

“Of course!”

“Okay, just tell us.”

“The name O’Farrell ring any bells?”

“The trainer at Bartholow Farms.”

“None other. Let me look at that note McAllister’s wife found.”

Jen interrupted her work at the computer to give it to him.

LL held it while we both studied it again. “COF. Call.—Machote, someone inside J.C. Who?”

“Do you know what O’Farrell’s real name is?” he asked.

“Mac O’Farrell,” I said as much a question as an answer.

“Nope. His full name is Ciaran Mac O’Farrell.”

“COF,” I whispered. “He was real unhappy because they had taken a horse of Mistral’s caliber to the knacker’s.”

“That’s what you said,” LL replied.

“You don’t suppose he could be McAllister’s informant, do you?” Jen asked.

“Could be. He could also be the guy that led to McAllister’s disappearance,” LL replied, massaging the side of his head.

“We should turn this over to the police,” Jen said.

“They’ve already got it,” LL responded.

“Yeah, but they may not know that O’Farrell is ‘COF.’ ”

“Believe me, if we found out this fast, they certainly did.” LL paused and tugged on one of his ears. “I just wonder what the police learned when they talked to him.”

Saturday

When the telephone rang before nine that morning, I was surprised it was LL. I'd driven him back to his apartment the night before so he could pick up Rosemary after her evening shift finished. The whole way back he talked and acted like a teenager who had a sure thing.

"Rise and shine, college boy. LL is on the scent."

"I've been up to two hours," I said.

"I talked to the police in Maywood this morning. They've been trying O'Farrell's cell phone all week, twenty-four/seven. No answer. And when they attempt to reach him at Bartholow Farms, they're told he'll call them back, but he doesn't. Nothing terribly suspicious—no one likes talking to the police—but three days later and they still haven't contacted him."

"Why don't they send someone down to the Farm to interview him?"

"That happens today. Portsmouth's finest are paying a visit to the farm."

"Can you find out what the police learn?" I knew he could. I just wanted to make certain he did.

"I could, but there'd be no point. O'Farrell's missing."

"Are you serious?"

"Rosemary and I went out for an early breakfast on the beach, and she called Bartholow Farms pretending to be O'Farrell's niece who had just arrived in the States and hoped to meet up with him. Someone told her that he returned to Ireland on Wednesday. They didn't have a number, and they didn't know where he was going."

"This is becoming a familiar pattern."

“I’d say, and they’re stringing Ambruso along by telling them that O’Farrell will call him back,” LL spat.

Quickly calculating the days, I noted, “He left for Ireland the day after McAllister disappeared.”

“Now there’s a coincidence. The only problem is he never left, at least not by any commercial airline. I’ve already checked Boston and New York for all the flights to Ireland. It’s possible he went someplace else or he hasn’t left yet, but I wouldn’t bank on it.”

“Who did Rosemary talk to?” I asked.

“A guy named Stevie. He didn’t give her a last name.”

* * *

Because Jen wanted to continue identifying and sorting the numbers Lee had called, she gave me a list of chores and errands. Add mowing the lawn and weeding the flowerbeds, and you’ve got a days worth of work. While I worked around the house, Jen, with only a few breaks, plugged away at her computer.

By late afternoon, when I came in sweaty from cutting the grass, she had looked up on the Internet every telephone number she could find. The ones that were businesses were almost uniformly Thoroughbred breeders and owners, and many of those, nearly twenty, had their own web sites. She had visited most of them and made detailed notes on her spreadsheet.

“I’ve massaged this information every way I can, and the only thing I can find is that several of the breeders and owners McAllister called owned at least one mare that had mated with Mistral, some more than once. But other than the Mistral connection, nothing jumps out at me. And I’m so bug-eyed, I just can’t look at this screen any more.”

“Well, this goes to prove that my instincts are once more shown entirely correct,” I said, “for we’ll have all evening to talk about it. I made a reservation at Alberto’s. Massimo had a cancellation and can get us in at six-thirty.”

It took a second for the news of a dinner out, particularly at Alberto’s, to pierce Jen’s computer-addled head, but the curl of her smile opened into a grin. She peeked at her watch. “I’ve got time to take a shower and change. Let me show you what I’ve done. You can take a look at it, see if you can make sense of it.” I stood behind Jen and watched as she flipped through the different spreadsheets she had created and explained the various permutations of data. It was about as comprehensible as a computer manual written in Korean.

“What’s this one?” I asked.

“Oh, that’s all of Mistral’s offspring that I could find. I’ve arranged them according to their date of birth, their dam, and the last column is other info I came across. For example, this foal sold for over six hundred thousand,” she said, pointing at an entry on her spreadsheet. “And this filly won her first two starts. Anything like that.”

As Jen rolled toward the bedroom, I pulled over a chair and sat down before the screen. She had four or five spreadsheets going. In one she had rearranged the telephone calls according to their length. In another they were organized by area code. In another spreadsheet the calls were sorted by their frequency. Interestingly, the most calls to any one telephone number were to The Jockey Club in Lexington, Kentucky, four calls.

* * *

By coincidence Massimo had seated us at the same table we’d shared the first time we’d eaten at Alberto’s. He handed me the wine list.

“What do you feel like?” I asked Jen. “A red or a white?”

“I’m not going to have any, thanks. A bottle of Pellegrino, please,” she said to Massimo.

Without a whole bottle of wine in my future, I ordered a glass of Pinot Grigio.

Jen reached across the table and took my hand. “This is the same table we had the first time we came here. Remember?”

“Absolutely,” I replied, squeezing her hand.

It had been five years earlier, on a summer Saturday. Jen was thirty and I was thirty-three. We had been at the beach for the day. Back at my apartment, still salty from the ocean, we made love for the first time. Afterwards we floated arm in arm to Alberto’s for a late dinner. Without a reservation we had a better chance of eating at the White House. But, as naively optimistic as lovesick teenagers, we waltzed in. The maitre de’s notice, “It will be a forty-five minute wait,” barely dampened our hormonal euphoria. Ten minutes later a surprise cancellation put us at what was, we decided at the time, the most romantic table in the restaurant. We accepted our luck unquestioningly as the rightful prerogative of star-blessed lovers.

Jen’s limber, bare legs had entwined mine as we touched and drank, and kissed and ate. Each touch and kiss had electrified the memory of our earlier passion and charged our desire for more. The meal became a delicious foreplay, a teasing prologue to the return to my apartment and each other’s embrace.

Jen squeezed my hand, snapping me out of my reverie. “Where’d you go?”

“I was thinking about that day, you know, when we came here for dinner.”

“I like that,” she replied, stroking my hand.

The waiter delivered my wine and poured Jen’s Pellegrino. Letting go of my hand, Jen lifted her glass. I raised my wineglass in response and we clinked.

“To the sexiest judge I know.”

“You haven’t slept with any others.”

* * *

I was in bed reading when Jen crawled in. She slid next to me and slipped an arm across my back. I twisted to give her a peck goodnight and felt that she was naked. She held onto the kiss. We both had known that this moment would come. I wasn’t sure how I would react, and if I didn’t know, Jen sure couldn’t. Or, then again, maybe she did. She rolled up against me, moving her hand down between my legs. Somehow it didn’t feel the same. As if my penis, always reliable, was no longer my partner in crime and pleasure. Now it seemed like it belonged to someone else.

I had often wondered how Jen felt after the accident when I would stroke between her legs. Right then, I felt like I knew. And it was odd, as if it wasn’t me she was touching, but some inanimate thing.

“You know,” she said, pulling closer. “You’re not the only one who wishes we could make love like we used to. I do too.”

“What do you mean?”

“I knew what you were thinking at dinner tonight, about the first time. I was thinking about the same thing.”

“It was a pretty special day, hard to forget. But I don’t think much about what it used to be like.”

“But you did tonight.”

“I did tonight,” I admitted, shifting so her head was in the hollow of my shoulder. “But I love you just the way you are. I love our life together. This fertility stuff can get to me, but it’s not the end of the world.”

“Do you fantasize about doing it with a woman who isn’t paralyzed?”

My chest heaved with a silent chuckle. “Every guy in America fantasizes about other women. We also fantasize about pitching for the Red Sox in the World Series. Not likely I’m going to do that either, the way they’re playing.”

“But you miss making love, having sex, with someone who has legs that flex and wrap?”

I paused before answering. We’d plowed this ground before, and Jen, for all her energy and determination, still had her dark moods when she lost confidence and mistook love for pity.

“Do you?” Jen asked, reminding me of her question.

“Do I miss making love *to you* before the accident? Sure, but I also miss playing football, not having to shave every day, frat parties. I’m sure, twenty years from now, I’ll miss sex all together.”

She slapped me playfully on the arm. “You’d better not.”

“But that’s what I mean. I remember it because I enjoyed it. I don’t miss it, because that time in our life is gone, and nothing you or I do is going to bring it back. Besides, these days you’re wearing me out with your demands. I can’t imagine what it would be like if you had two legs that worked. I’d be some desiccated shadow.”

“Do you feel rested tonight?” she asked, with an upward lilt in her tone.

“Did your BBT spike?” I teased.

“No, probably not for another week. But who knows, tonight may be our lucky night.”

“I doubt it.”

“It can’t hurt to try.” Jen wriggled her way down my chest until her head was between my legs. Resting on her elbows, she glanced up. “We need to get this fella back into shape.”

And she dipped her head down. My old friend came instantly awake, and urges as old as creation flooded my brain and groin.

After a few minutes I drew her up and rolled her onto her back. We were deliberately quiet and gentle, letting our lovemaking take its own course, its own time. Afterward we lay in the darkness, Jen curled in my arms, both of us warm and slippery with perspiration.

“I love you,” Jen breathed into my ear.

“Boy, do I ever love you, too,” I whispered back, punctuating it with a tighter embrace and a wiggle of my hips.

“Let’s hope,” Jen murmured softly, “that tonight is the night I get pregnant.”

“The odds aren’t that great with me as the sperm donor.”

“I know, but I can still hope. I really want a baby, but most of all I want a baby that’s entirely ours.”

“With our luck, she’ll be stuck with all the Parisi genes.”

Jen pressed herself against me. “I love your DNA,” she cooed. “This body, this chin—” Her hand traced up my face “—these lips, this nose, and your silky black hair. I think your DNA is nearly perfect.” Giggling, she mussed my hair.

A few minutes later Jen was asleep, purring gently into my shoulder. It took me longer. I meditated about us, wondering if she would ever conceive with me as her husband and frowning at the idea of her being impregnated like a laboratory guinea pig with someone else’s sperm. I imagined Brittany, lying alone in a hospital room, having to call a nurse for her every need, and I wondered what the future had in store for her. And I felt my rage rise and my restraint retreat as I weighed whether the Posse or Bartholow were monster enough to jeopardize a little girl’s future for a hank of hair.

For half an hour, teetering fitfully between sleep and wakefulness, my mind drifted without constraints amongst these thoughts and others. Images, ideas, concerns, and anger floated in and out. There was no order, no logic, only random half-dreams that sailed through a tiny crack in my consciousness. DNA. DI.

Seemingly unbidden by any intention on my part, various bits began to come together. What before had seemed disparate elements of separate puzzles suddenly started to sprout connections, which drew to themselves yet other pieces until my mind reeled. When the whole thing finally congealed I barely dared to breathe for fear of losing the tenuous structure I'd created.

That fear passed quickly, though, because what I'd come up with was so self-evidently logical and correct I couldn't forget it if I lived to be a hundred. I sat bolt upright and got out of bed and went to Jen's computer.

Sunday

Daylight couldn't come soon enough. Although I'd crawled back into bed around four-thirty, the thought of sleep was utterly laughable, and all I managed to do was squirm uncontrollably for fifteen minutes. I desperately wanted to wake Jen but not that early, so I got up again, made coffee, and waited for the paperboy. I tried to go through the paper but found myself reading one sentence—the first—over and over, unable to process it and move on to the next. By six-fifteen I didn't know if the uncontrollable buzzing in my spine came from my feverish brain or the four cups of coffee I'd downed, but I couldn't stand sitting there any longer. I made a pot of green tea for Jen and headed for the bedroom.

Sitting down on her wheelchair wakened her, and though I apologized, the truth was that, without it seeming altogether too obvious, I wanted her up, and right then. Ignoring her cross look as she rolled over and began rubbing her eyes against the morning light, I said, "I've got news."

Something in my voice must have penetrated her grogginess because she stopped rubbing and took her hands away from her face. "What?" She reached for the tea.

I held it back so she would give me her full attention. "Someone else has been shooting blanks besides me."

"Who?" she mumbled disinterestedly.

"Mistral," I said softly, and watched with satisfaction as she snapped her head up, her eyes wide open.

* * *

"That's why Winny wants the hair," I nearly shouted as I paced the family room, unable to sit still. I'd been trying to explain everything at once, and forced myself to slow down for a

breath and let things settle. “Bartholow Farms was having financial problems. LL found that out. But there was a savior, Mistral, the greatest stallion ever. He stood to make a couple of hundred thousand every time they bred him. Before every stallion goes out to stud, his semen’s tested, same as mine was. Winny’s a smart businessman. He’s got too much riding on Mistral, so he has the semen tested privately first. And guess what? It’s no good. You know, same old story: sperm count’s lousy, they refuse to swim, and their tails are all screwed up. What’s he going to do? He owns potentially the greatest stallion ever, but the horse is sterile. He’s looking at tens of millions in stud fees going down the drain. So he substitutes some other stallion’s semen. But the DNA wouldn’t match. It would have shown that the offspring weren’t really Mistral’s.”

“I don’t know,” she said.

I barely heard her doubts. “Machote—”

“The name of the horse from the message.”

“Right. He’s a Thoroughbred stallion stabled at Bartholow Farms. I spent a frigging fortune on Equineline-dot-com last night—”

“What’s that?”

“It has all this information about Thoroughbreds. I mean more than you would ever want to know. Four years ago, right before Mistral’s first breeding season, Bartholow personally purchased Machote for over two million. He was a good horse—not the quality of Mistral, of course—but he had a good record. More importantly he had never been bred and was about to go out to stud himself.” I paused and turned to face Jen, who was sipping her tea at the milking table. “But good old Machote went into oblivion. He never raced again and he never bred. A two million dollar investment just stood around gobbling grain.”

Jen brightened as her understanding of the scheme grew. “Bartholow was substituting Machote’s semen for Mistral’s.”

“Right, and here’s something else. Both Machote and Mistral were both dark chestnuts.”

“So the offspring would look alike.”

“Guess when Machote died?”

“Did he?”

“Yep, in March, right at the end of the breeding season.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Right after they increased the insurance on Mistral. Without Machote to cover for him next year, Mistral was useless. They couldn’t keep breeding him because they no longer had Machote’s sperm to substitute. Mistral was as good as dead the minute after Machote died.”

Jen shook her head with amazement. “Wow.”

“That Saturday I went riding with Brittany. I watched one of Mistral’s so-called offspring running at their track. O’Farrell was real disappointed, said ‘she wasn’t like her father.’ Of course not. Mistral wasn’t her father.”

We sat silently for a moment, allowing the scope of it all to register. Jen was the first to speak. “If every foal has to be DNA typed, then Mistral and Machote would have been typed shortly after they were born?”

“Right,” I said, knowing exactly where she was going.

“Wouldn’t someone have figured out that Mistral’s progeny were really Machote’s?”

“Not if someone inside altered the records.” I read from McAllister’s note. “‘Someone inside J.C. Who?’ J.C. is the abbreviation for Jockey Club. ‘Someone inside The Jockey Club.’”

Lee had figured out that in order for the swindle to work Bartholow had to have a confederate working on the inside, someone doctoring the registry records.”

“Who, though?”

“I don’t know. But come look at these telephone bills,” I said, leading her over to the computer. From Jen’s spreadsheet I had filtered out all the calls made to Lexington’s area code, 606. “He didn’t start calling The Jockey Club until Monday afternoon. Three calls in the space of three hours. And right after that—see—there’s a call to United Airlines for a ticket to Cincinnati, ninety miles up the road from Lexington.”

“To see the guy who was assisting Bartholow?”

“I don’t know, but when Lee started making calls to the registry, asking questions about both Mistral and Machote, it must have been getting pretty warm at Bartholow Farms.”

Jen rolled back to the milking table and her green tea. “If you’re right, it means someone tripped Brittany’s horse.” She said it with no inflection, knowing that the statement by itself was weighty enough without adding any emotion.

I dropped into my chair without responding. Brittany hadn’t left my thoughts all night long. Each discovery, each tied connection closed the circle tighter, and at the center was my one and only godchild. The cool calculating side of me that had perceived Bartholow’s plot tried to quiet the volcano that raged in my gut. I took a sip of coffee and over the top of it peered at my wife who was waiting for my answer. “Grandpa used to say that the meanest man in the world is a Genovese fisherman whose family’s been hurt. I never really understood what he meant until now.”

Jen cocked her head slightly with a quizzical glance.

“They nearly killed Brittany and you, and there is going to be hell to pay.” The nitro in my stomach swirled slowly around.

Jen appraised me for a moment. If she had some comment—and I was sure she did—she intuitively knew right then wasn't the time. "What now?"

"I'm going to retrace Lee McAllister's steps," I replied.

As strong as it was, I knew I still had only a theory, a circumstantial hypothesis without proof. I wouldn't get anywhere with it until I found some tangible piece of evidence, an eyewitness, a clue, a key to pull it all together. I walked over to the computer and hit the return button, erasing the screensaver and exposing Jen's spreadsheet of telephone numbers.

"Someone he talked to must have given him the answer."

"And a death sentence," she added. Fear spread over her face, pinching her eyes and tightening her lips.

* * *

I started calling McAllister's telephone numbers, one by one. Assuming that Lee may have sharpened his focus as he went along, I began with the last breeder he called, a Thoroughbred farm in Maryland. It took a few minutes for them to find the manager, who I was surprised to learn was a woman. Sitting next to me in front of the computer, Jen took notes.

I introduced myself as Dick Athens from Equine Assurance—that seemed far enough away both alphabetically and geographically from Tony Paris to be safe—and explained that I was a co-worker of Lee McAllister, calling to see if they might remember something that could help us discover where he was or what had happened to him.

"Yes, I remember the call," she said. "He asked how Mistral's foals had turned out. I told him that we've been very pleased. His death was a terrible loss to the Thoroughbred industry."

“How long did you talk to Mr. McAllister?” I asked.

“Not long at all. He simply wanted to know how the foals were. There isn’t a lot to tell.”

“Do you know why he asked about the foals?”

“No idea at all, and he didn’t say.”

“And your foals were fine?” I asked, even though she had already told me they were.

“Yes. You see, we’re primarily breeders and auction off most of our stock as yearlings. We sell hopes and dreams. But our stock out of Mistral did produce several Stakes winners. Honey Moon, who was out of Honey Child, was a very fast filly and won three Grade III stakes races.”

“So the foals were all comparable to Mistral?” I was fishing by then.

“Oh no, none of them were as special as Mistral. He’s a once in a century Thoroughbred, but they were all superior animals.”

That McAllister had inquired about the breeder’s satisfaction with Mistral’s foals encouraged me that my hypothesis was on the right track, but her answers also raised some doubts. I called the next number.

By nine I had reached five of the individuals McAllister had talked to with similar results. Each remembered him asking if they were satisfied with Mistral’s foals. Other than a couple of bad results, which were to be expected they explained, all the foals were fine. Nothing spectacular, but no complaints. I didn’t know what to expect, but the glowing praise for Mistral’s offspring, even though none were apparently at his level, caused me to wonder if I really was on the right track.

During a lull, my mother rang, complaining about our busy signal, and asking if we were planning to go to mass. I begged off, telling her that I had a lot of orders to get out. It sounded

pretty lame. Nonie knew I didn't work many weekends, and I could sense that she was unhappy with my choice of priorities. It crossed my mind to gain her good graces by confiding that I was trying to find out who had caused Brittany's horse to fall, but didn't. That would have upset her even more.

To make the work go faster, Jen began calling, using her cell phone and pretending to be Jane Rome—we were trying to cover the capitals. Four or five calls later, we caught a slight break. A California breeder couldn't say enough good about Winny Bartholow and Mistral. "Yes, an insurance man as I recollect. Told him the same as I'm telling you. No complaints."

I explained about McAllister's disappearance and my concern for his whereabouts, without overdramatizing it. Then I pressed, "Mr. McAllister seemed to think that there was something fishy, you know, suspicious about Mistral's offspring and his death. Do you have any idea what he might have been looking for?"

"No, not at all. Bartholow Farms is probably the most credible, trustworthy operation there is. For example, they were one the first breeding stables to videotape the mating."

"Really," I replied. Disappointed but not deterred, I kept casting. "I'm almost done. Do you remember anything else about your conversation with Mr. McAllister that might help us?"

"No, not really. He did ask about their personalities, if that's any help."

"What did you tell him?"

"That they were like any other Thoroughbred, high-strung, cranky at times, you know."

"Yeah," I answered, recollecting Brittany raving about what a sweet horse Mistral was.

Because McAllister had asked it, Jen and I added a question about the personalities of Mistral's progeny to our list. By lunchtime we had completed sixteen calls, and the emerging pattern didn't prove or disprove my hypothesis. The answers were similar. Mistral's offspring

were above average quality with a few flops and with several near greats, but none that were his equal. More positive were the reports that none of Mistral's foals possessed his good nature.

After lunch we were having trouble reaching the individuals McAllister had spoken to, but we didn't dare leave a number for them to call back. Then, early that afternoon, we encountered a major setback.

Jen set her cell phone down, her lips compressed with grim concentration. "That was a guy from California. Woodward Tyler. He's bred twenty-two mares with Mistral. And every one of them inherited Mistral's conformation and a gentle disposition. And, get this, he said, 'Your questions suggest that you suspect there might have been some monkey business during Mistral's breeding.' But that would have been impossible because he always insists that at least one of his stable boys or grooms stay with his mare the whole time, twenty-four/seven. Said he wouldn't breed any other way, even with someone of Winny Bartholow's caliber."

"Then how the hell could Bartholow have managed to artificially impregnate Tyler's mares?" I asked.

"Good question," Jen admitted.

Now I had serious doubts. Why would someone as rich and prominent as Winny Bartholow fool around with something this explosive, this ugly? All the benign answers that I had been carelessly dismissing rushed into my mind like a flood tide, sweeping away my diabolical conspiracies. Lessons learned and forgotten came back: *When in doubt, always suspect inadvertence before malevolence*. Was I projecting my own dark view of life onto Bartholow? Was my own pursuit fueled by impure motives? Jealousy of someone that rich, that successful. Revenge for what I speculated he had done to Brittany.

Jen was not as quick to give up as I was. "That's only one call out of nineteen. Let's take a run and roll. We can try again at suppertime. Something will turn up."

* * *

Around five, Jen and I started calling again. Like telemarketers, we seemed to find all our victims at home. The first six calls held to the same pattern. The smoking gun came on my seventh call. It was an owner from Kentucky. The influence of his native liquor was clearly evident, stretching his drawl and loosening his restraint.

“I’ll tell you this,” he slurred, “Winny Bartholow thinks his shit doesn’t stink, and no one in the industry wants to take him on.” I heard the clink of ice cubes in a glass and a noisy sip. “But anyone who knows anything about horses knows Mistral is a beautiful stallion, but he’s got weak genes and a lousy breeding record. His breeding has dropped off every year since he began standing. Hell, Winny called me at the beginning of last season, practically begging me to breed Persian Indigo.” He paused for another slurp.

“Persian Indigo?” I ask.

He harrumphed a scornful laugh. “Do you know anything about horse racing?”

“Not really, but I’m learning.”

“Persian Indigo is the best goddamn blue hen in Kentucky. She’s produced more stakes winners and stakes producers than you can shake a stick at. And I’m supposed to waste a breeding season having her lug around Mistral’s pathetic...” He struggled for the right word, gave up, and took another sip.

“I talked to some other breeders who were very satisfied with Mistral’s offspring.”

“And you believed them? Listen son, all their ponies are for sale, and that sale price will have a bearing on the value of every other horse in the barn. It’ll even affect the value of a foal two generations hence. Now, do you really think a breeder is going to tell some stranger that this or that foal is disappointing or mediocre? No,” he snorted, and switched to saleswoman’s

voice, “All our horses are the prettiest things you ever saw, with speed that isn’t to be believed. We can’t bear to part with them.” He returned to his normal tone. “And I’ll tell you one other thing, no one wants to cross Bartholow. A few whispered words from him and a breeder won’t find a decent stallion to mate with.”

“But haven’t some of his progeny won races?”

“Shit, I could breed a coon dog with Persian Indigo and win some no-account race at some no-account track. Have you seen any of Mistral’s get?”

I pictured the thick neck and blocky physique of the filly O’Farrell was training.

“They are the most misshapen lot of Thoroughbreds I’ve ever laid eyes on. Not a one of them has come close to his conformation. Some are better than others, but with him as a sire...”

“Do you have any idea why that is?”

He laughed. “Sure, son, I’ve got lots of ideas, but my mammy didn’t raise no fool. I tell you, and the next thing I know I’m a defendant in some courtroom with a bunch of sharp shysters accusing me of slander. I know how it works, and I’m not tellin’ some stranger; what’d you say your name was again?”

“Dick Athens.”

“Well Dick, I hope you find your friend.” With that he hung up.

I was certain by then that no one was ever going to find McAllister alive. Jen was getting ready to dial another number.

“Listen to this,” I said and recounted the conversation. “If it weren’t for that Woodward Tyler, I’d be convinced that I’m right. Every single owner and breeder we’ve asked, with the exception of Tyler, has said that Mistral’s offspring were high-strung and temperamental like any other Thoroughbred.”

“Maybe Tyler’s lying,” she said.

“But why?”

“Because people do, and maybe this breeder from Kentucky hit the nail on the head. No one dares mess with the great Winny Bartholow. Tyler could be beholden to Bartholow, scared shitless of him, or, who knows, madly in love with him.”

“I suppose,” I replied, amused by the image. “I wish I knew.”

“Call your Kentucky friend back.”

“Believe me, he’s no friend. I doubt he’ll talk to me again.”

“Let me try him. You get on the other line. What’s his number?”

I read it off to her and went down to our bedroom to listen in.

Jen got through to him in short order, and mentioned that he and I (Dick Athens) had just talked.

“Yeah,” he grumbled. “I probably said enough to cause me problems for the rest of my life.”

“No, no, you didn’t. Really,” she tried to reassure him. “You didn’t tell him anything we didn’t already know.”

“Sure,” he grunted.

“There’s one quick follow-up question I wanted to ask you. Do you happen to know a Tyler Woodard?”

He harrumphed as if it were a foolish question. “The biggest breeder in California and one of the biggest in the U.S. There’s no one that doesn’t know him.”

“What kind of relationship does he have with Winny Bartholow?” she asked.

“Twins separated at birth.”

“One last question: would he lie for Mr. Bartholow?”

This time he chuckled. “The better question would be who he wouldn’t lie for.”

* * *

We spent the rest of the evening going over where we were. Although my surmise had been pretty much confirmed, we still had no hard evidence. “We could build a circumstantial case that would raise lots of troublesome questions about Bartholow Farms’ breeding practices, but without a witness, without some physical evidence, we were sunk. Worse still, we don’t have enough evidence to even indict someone for McAllister’s death or Brittany’s fall, let alone convict him.”

All day long I had been picturing Brittany, trying to maintain everyone else’s spirits with stammered greetings and halting laughter. That was the hardest part. I knew I could hurt Bartholow, but without more evidence the pain I could cause him was a pinprick compared to what he had done to Brittany.

“Well, I’m going to bed. I’m sure you’ll think of something.” Jen wheeled over to the milking table where I was sitting with all our notes and a warm, half-empty can of beer. “Call LL, see what he thinks.”

“I did a few minutes ago. He’s still not back.”

We kissed, and she rolled off to the bedroom. I got up and began to pick up and close up for the night. By the time I climbed into bed, the indistinct outline of a plan was beginning to take shape. Laying there in the darkness, I worked through it a couple of times in my mind, following the steps, until I fell asleep.

Monday

I couldn't wait to tell LL what I had figured out, but he wasn't at his apartment when I swung by. I found him in my chambers, occupying his customary chair. Without asking, he snatched the Coastal Courier from under my arm as I walked by.

"All you have to do is call," I said. "Just tell me you're not going to be there."

He barely looked up from the newspaper, which he had unfolded onto the conference table in front of him. "I have an excuse," he said, smoothing back his hair like some star of the silent screen. "But it's too intimate to talk about."

"Call me the night before then."

LL chuckled. "Same problem."

"Somewhere in heaven your parents are trying to hide their shame."

Peter Gigas materialized, tapping his fingers on my door. Still pumped by my discovery, I greeted him effusively. "*Good morning*, Judge Gigas."

His solemn cast didn't change. "I need to talk to you." To LL he pointedly said, "Alone."

Gigas stood behind LL, who remaining in his chair, said, "I'm sorry, I haven't finished with the paper yet. Could you come back later when I'm not as busy?"

"Out!" I ordered.

LL—for the first time I could ever recall—folded my newspaper back up, deliberately and with great care, making sure every corner matched, before he rose to leave.

Gigas glared at the back of his head, drawing a deep breath and puffing up like a blowfish. "Do you routinely allow this impertinence?"

"I don't know what's gotten into him."

Gigas harrumphed as LL passed by him on the way out of my chambers and then swirled in, his hands grasping the back of a chair. “He does not reflect well on you.”

“He has other qualities,” I responded.

“None of them good, I’m sure.” Gigas stood straighter, clasping his hands across his stomach. “Tony, as you probably know, Winny Bartholow is a close friend of mine.”

Now, there was another reason not to like him. Nevertheless, my interest perked up considerably.

“He’s a respected, indeed in some quarters, a revered citizen of this state. Yesterday, I was told that you have been contacting a number of his trusted customers and clients, suggesting some sort of breeding imbroglio.”

Although I shouldn’t have been, I was surprised that Bartholow would have found out so quickly. “What?” I said, acting as if the accusation confused me.

Gigas waved his hands to dismiss my innocence. “There is no Dick Athens who works for Equine Assurance. And a few caller IDs showed that the call was from a New Hampshire number—yours.”

Denying it seemed pretty stupid since he already knew; yet admitting it didn’t make a lot of sense either. I tried to get off the defensive. “Who made it your business?”

“Winny, of course,” Gigas responded without a hint of doubt about his actions. “I mean, what got into you.”

I was tempted to describe Brittany’s prognosis and to tell him what it feels like to be shot at in a boneyard, but held my tongue.

“It took me a half hour this morning to calm him down, for which you should be grateful. He was ready to sue you for slander, intentional interference with business

relationships, and to report you to the Judicial Conduct Committee. I mean harassing and badgering his customers and clients, really.”

“I didn’t harass or badger anyone!” I blurted out in my defense, and at the same time admitting that I had made the calls. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Winny tells me that by tomorrow night he’ll have the affidavits in my hands.” He hesitated a beat, waiting for my reaction. But I didn’t have any, too astounded that someone twenty miles away had that kind of power and resources at his disposal. “Tony, this has to stop. You’re embarrassing yourself, the court, and a distinguished businessman, who certainly doesn’t deserve this.”

I took a deep long breath, trying to keep control. Winny was as crooked as they come, and if he wasn’t behind the murders or disappearances and Brittany’s accident, he had to know about them. And here was Gigas preaching at me.

“He’s very angry and upset. Fortunately, I’ve persuaded him not to take any precipitous action. But that’s only if you will stop this silly and demeaning quest of yours.”

The collar of my shirt tightened as blood rushed to my already overheated head. My neck stiffened. “Is that a threat?”

“Of course not.” Gigas coughed ever so slightly. “It’s merely a report. This is a free country; you can do anything you want, but you should at least thoroughly comprehend the consequences.”

I stared sullenly at Gigas, who looked away as he smoothed his robe. He cleared his throat. “As a colleague and friend—” *friend*, who the hell was he kidding “—I feel obligated to tell you all of this. You have to curb yourself.”

“Peter, answer me this: Did you ask him where Lee McAllister is? Did you ask him who killed Horrie Byam? Did you ask him about my niece’s fall? Did you ask him why my questions bother him so much? Why don’t you ask him those questions?”

Clearing his throat, he walked toward the door. “You’ll have to excuse me,” he said. “I have some things I need to attend to.”

As he left, LL almost simultaneously reentered, reassuring me that he had overheard everything. “What was that all about?”

I laid out Bartholow’s breeding scam, why Mistral’s hair was so critical, and with possibly a hint of pride, related how my theory tied everything together.

As I was finishing up, Ralph Beaudoin came by my chambers. “Sorry, just checking in judge. Counsel asked about you, and I wanted to make sure there wasn’t a problem.” He rolled his wrist and glanced at his watch. Translation: The lobby is full of attorneys and litigants ready to go, it’s nine-fifteen, get off your ass and into the courtroom.

“Let’s get rolling,” I said to LL, as Ralph ducked out of my chambers.

Curling the newspaper into a rough tube, LL dropped it on the conference table. “I hate it when I can’t get a good start on my crossword before the first case of the day.”

* * *

My trial that morning was a contract action between a builder and subcontractor to determine who was responsible for a fire that gutted a nearly complete new home. As much as I wanted to go over my plan to trap Bartholow, the hearing was so fact-intensive that I didn’t dare let my attention wander too far. It wasn’t until the noon recess that I was able to analyze it one more time as I chewed on my lunch.

When LL showed up a few minutes before we were to restart, I said, "I have an idea of how to trap Bartholow. I've been mulling it over since last night. I think it'll work, but first I have to get a meeting with him."

"Oh, that should be easy. From what Gigas was saying this morning, it sounds like he's dying to meet you."

"I think he'll meet with me, if for no other reason than to find out how much I know."

"What's your plan?"

"I'll tell you later, what I really want to know is if you'll help?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Here goes," I said, picking up the telephone and dialing Bartholow's number.

"I hope you know what you're doing college boy."

"I hope so too," I said as the telephone rang at Bartholow Farms. Introducing yourself as a judge has some great advantages. One of the best is being put right through to the person you want to talk to.

"Hi ho, Judge Tony," Winny greeted me as if his complaints to Gigas had never happened. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, you know that Lee McAllister is missing," I said.

"Equine's insurance investigator. Yes, I heard that, and the police have called here a couple of times to see if we could help. I do so hope he is okay. We had our disagreements, but I was quite fond of him. A bulldog sort of chap."

"I assume you also know that we barged in on the murderers of Horrie Byam, who then nearly killed us."

"I did read about that in the paper. It must have been terrifying."

"It was. In any event it spurred me to do some research on Mistral."

“Mees-tral.”

I ignored him. “Part of that research was the telephone calls I made yesterday, which seem to upset you so.”

“You can understand, I hope, how questions like that can raise serious doubts, even start damaging rumors.”

“I can imagine. In any event I’d like to discuss some of what I found. Privately, of course,” I added.

I could hear pages in his datebook being turned. His voice was as cool as a cucumber. “I have some free time at the beginning of next week. How does lunch sound.”

“It’s pretty important. I was actually hoping I could see you tomorrow,” I said, crossing my fingers that he would bite.

“Tomorrow? Tomorrow, you say. That might work. Could you come out here, late in the afternoon, around six? I always slow down around cocktail time. We could have a drink.”

“That would be fine.”

“See you then,” he said and hung up the telephone.

“Tomorrow at six,” I said to LL. “He’s worried.”

“What are you planning on doing?”

“See if he’s interested in a deal.”

“And what exactly do you have to offer him?”

“Something he can’t refuse.”

* * *

On my way home I stopped off at the Seacoast Regional Rehabilitation Center to see Brittany. A boxy, modern, brick building, it looked something like a generic junior college

dorm, which basically was what it was. Handicapped patients, stroke victims, brain damaged patients, people like Jen with spinal cord injuries, would live there for months, undergoing intensive rehabilitation until they were ready to return home or there was nothing more that rehab could do for them.

In some ways, rehab was worse than Jen's hospitalization, for it was there that she came to grips with the truth that her paraplegia was a life sentence. The rehab specialists were caring, but wouldn't allow their charges to waste their energy daydreaming unrealistic fantasies. For Jen back then, in her frame of mind, that was hard enough, but the physical side of rehab was no cakewalk either.

Some of the therapists acted like frustrated coaches, driving their patients to their limits and beyond. Jen's upper body coach worked her so hard that after an hour and a half she would be drenched in sweat. She hated his power over her, but instead of rebelling, she was determined to show him up by outperforming his expectations, and the overactive coach and the stubborn patient fed off each other, pushing the other harder and harder.

The receptionist was new and didn't recognize me. I asked for Brittany Parisi's room.

The girl looked at the register. "Her room is 132, but if she's not there, she's probably in the game room." She started to give me directions.

"It's okay," I explained, setting off for Brittany's room. "I've been here before."

Brittany was in her room, seated in an institutional wheelchair with its high back and push handles, at a table drawing horses. The only other person there was her mother, who was seated in a chair facing out the single window, reading a paperback.

My godchild saw me the second I crossed the threshold, but it took three or four of my steps before she was able to stammer, "Uncle Tony."

Barbara's head came up from her book. "Hi, Tony."

“Hi kiddo,” I said to Brittany.

She gestured at the horse she was coloring brown. Tapping her crayon onto the paper, she fought to say something. “It’s Aero. He’s in heaven.” Pointing at the background, which I had thought was distant hills, as yet uncolored, she squeezed out, “In the clouds, with God.”

I turned to Barbara with a questioning look, privately embarrassed at my deceit.

“Aero?” I asked.

“She broke her leg in Brittany’s fall, and had to be put down. Bartholow Farms’ vet called us last week.”

Threading my hand through Brittany’s halo, I petted the top of her head where her hair was now over an inch long. “I’m sorry to hear that Brittany.” I meant it, but the nitro in my belly began moving again. By force of will I was able to still and cool it, determined to save my growing rage for when it counted.

“How’s everything going?”

She shrugged and frowned slightly, suggesting it was so-so, not bothering with the effort to articulate.

I stayed for another fifteen minutes, talking idly with Brittany, answering her questions about what bad people I had put in jail that day and what they had done wrong. But the silences became longer and more awkward. Part of it was Brittany, who clearly was still having trouble talking, although she seemed a little less self-conscious about it, and part of it was me, remembering my evenings with Jen in her room on the second floor, trying to be upbeat without mentioning the future, fruitlessly searching for neutral subjects that might interest her. After a couple of weeks, the silences became so long and uncomfortable that we gave up, and I started bringing jigsaw puzzles for us to work on together. We spent our evenings putting the

puzzles together, searching for the right piece, the right thing to say, organizing the colors and our emotions, piece by piece, as we tried to reassemble our broken lives.

As had become customary, I kissed my fingertips, touched them to her lips, and then to mine. "I'll see you in a couple of days," I said.

"Is Jen coming?" she asked haltingly.

I hesitated. "Soon," I answered.

Barbara rose. "I'll walk you to your car."

On the way she told me that Brittany was spending part of every day with a speech therapist and a psychologist who was testing her to gain a handle on the extent of her cognitive loss. "They say with time, a lot of it will come back," Barbara said without much conviction. "But there are some things that absolutely stump her. It's as if they just flew out of her brain. She can add simple numbers, but anything with two digits are beyond her. And when you teach her that thirteen plus sixteen total twenty-nine, she can't hold the thought. I don't think she's going to be able to go into the third grade this fall." Barbara hugged herself and frowned. "I don't know what we're going to do."

I know what I'm going to do. "What about her legs?" I asked, with my car door open.

"She has some sensation. They're really hoping she'll be left with enough strength to use a walker." Barbara eyes grabbed a hold of mine. "Imagine, Tony, two weeks ago you dropped my girl off at a horse barn and now I'm hoping she'll be able to use a walker and arm braces."

"Yeah," I said bitterly for a reason Barbara misunderstood.

"I'm so sorry, Tony. I wasn't trying to compare Brittany to Jen. You've got your own problems. I'm really sorry."

“I was thinking about something else, something entirely different,” I said, feeling the nitro start to slosh again.

* * *

Over dinner, a pasta salad with Maine crab and artichoke hearts, I laid out my plan to Jen, asking her to test each part to see if a fresh mind might expose some weakness.

“It’s a clever idea,” she said. “But why don’t we take your plan to the police and let them carry it out?”

“I thought about that. The main reason is entrapment. Do you know what that is?”

“Sort of.”

“The police can’t persuade someone to commit a crime that he otherwise would not commit. It’s a real murky area of the law, but if the police aren’t involved in the sting, then it isn’t entrapment.”

“Aren’t you like law enforcement?”

“Not for purposes of entrapment, as long as I’m not cooperating with the police.”

“Is that true for LL, too?” she asked.

I thought for a second. “I would think so. He’s retired, and I don’t think a bailiff would qualify.”

“Good. Because I think you should take LL with you. If these guys are as dangerous as you think, I’d feel a lot better if he went along.”

“I’m sure he would, particularly if you were the one to ask him.”

She smiled at that, knowing that he would never say no to her. “I’ll call him later.”

* * *

Our books were put away and the lights were off, but both of us lay in bed not yet asleep, silently pondering the course we were on.

Jen rolled slightly to face me. “Are you awake?”

“Yes,” I answered, not opening my eyes. I thought she wanted to say something, but at least another minute passed in silence. I heard her shift.

“The news about your sperm...well, in one way it was a relief for me.”

I had hoped that might be her reaction, taking her paraplegia off the hook for her inability to conceive. That, I thought, was the silver lining in all of this, that no longer would she have to blame herself; I could now share some of that load.

“I need to tell you something.” She paused for a few beats. “Promise me you won’t judge me by it.”

“What?”

“Do you remember the year I took off from the University after my dad died?”

“Sure.” Back then I knew Jen only by sight. I had never met her. She had been a freshman cheerleader, the only freshman to make the squad. I was a senior defensive back, warming the bench and studying the cheerleaders. Twelve years later, after we had started dating, she told me her father had died at the end of that year, and she’d had to take the next year off to earn money to go back to college.

“I got pregnant that summer.” My eyes sprang open and I glanced over. A single tear wet a trail down her cheek. “And had an abortion. In Portland.”

I didn’t respond, but it reminded me of the wide receiver who had dated her that fall, and I found myself wondering if he might have been the father.

“I still dream about my baby. I can see him. A tiny miniature boy.” More teardrops formed and rolled down, like rain on a windowpane. She snuffled through the next sentence. “I

want that baby back so badly now, so badly. I'd give anything." I was stunned, too stunned to even help. Jen moved closer, and I curled her in my arms, feeling her tears on my chest. "I never wanted you to know," she said.

"Why?" It came out raspy, and I cleared my throat. "I understand."

"Embarrassment, shame, and then I thought it was the reason I couldn't get pregnant."

"An abortion?"

"Like God was punishing me. 'I gave you a perfectly good baby and you didn't want him. Don't ask for My help now.'"

"I wish you'd told me."

"I've never told anyone. Even Nancy doesn't know." Nancy Eisen had been and still was her best friend. "And you, a good Catholic boy. I was never going to tell you."

"Not that good."

She looked up, her eyes reflecting what little light there was. "All that time...all that time, it wasn't the abortion at all."

"I always thought your paralysis was the problem."

"I told you it wasn't."

"I know, I know, but I figured something down there had gone to sleep."

Jen's body rippled with tiny giggles.

"What's so funny?" I said, glad for the chance to find something humorous in all this.

"You're the one handicapped, not me." She was smiling, her face still wet with tears.

"Oh my God, imagine that."

"Very funny. I don't ever remembering laughing at your paralysis."

"Well, you can have the last laugh because no one is ever going to believe that you're the one with the handicap."

She was right. Everyone would think the reason we couldn't get pregnant was because of her. A guilty pang shot through me. I didn't want to deal with the questions, the jokes, the wounding sympathy— "Don't you wish you had known that when you were eighteen?" But Jen dealt with that stuff all the time, every day. Stares, thoughtless remarks, and now, because of my own shortcomings, I was about to add another load onto her shoulders.

I imagined the conversation between Jen and some friend. "It's so too bad you can't get pregnant, Jen. Do they know what the problem is?"

Jen answers, protecting me. "They're working on it."

The friend glances down at her legs and then catches her eye. They both know what the other is thinking. It's the paralysis.

But it was me; I was the culprit.

Tuesday

The late afternoon was hotter and sultrier than it had been at midday. The wind had died and the clouds vanished. All that remained was a milky sky that filtered little of the sun's heat. LL wanted to drive his Cadillac to Bartholow Farms — “It'll make a much better impression than that tin-bucket Saturn of yours.” At five-thirty he wheeled into our driveway, top down, the car reflecting more sunlight than a crystal. Even though it was hot and steamy, he was dressed as if he were going to a funeral: polished police shoes, blue blazer, and a NASCAR belt buckle as big and shiny as a car bumper.

“I'm sure Winny will be very impressed with your wardrobe.”

He looked down anxiously at his outfit.

“You look great,” Jen chimed in. “Don't pay any attention to Tony.”

LL smirked back at me, a catlike expression of self-satisfaction spreading across his face.

Winny wasn't at the Farm when we arrived. “Out riding,” we were told. We waited on a spacious wooden deck that wrapped around one end of the main house, steaming in the sun. Twenty minutes later Edward Ramses Wingate Bartholow arrived in style, pulling up behind the house on a big Palomino. He jumped down and handed his reins and riding helmet to a stable boy, who waited while Winny removed his gloves and dropped them into his helmet. His hair, matted with perspiration, on this day was dyed Andy Warhol platinum.

“Judge Tony, how nice of you to come.” He spied LL, perched carefully and uncomfortably on a white metal patio chair.

I could feel the nitro, sluggish until then, start to warm. “This is my bailiff, Lionel LaCasse.”

Bartholow walked toward LL with his right arm extended. “Nice to meet you, Lionel,” he said.

“LL is what everybody calls me,” LL muttered back, as he rose reluctantly to take the proffered hand.

“How would you like a mint julep?” Winny asked.

LL looked at me questioningly.

“Sure,” I answered.

“Stevie,” Bartholow bellowed through the screen door.

Stevie Holmes, the farm manager, appeared, dressed like Winny in knee-high boots, riding breeches, and polo shirt. “The Carruthers will be here in half an hour,” Stevie warned in a tone that bespoke of some intimacy.

Winny dismissed the warning with a domestic wave of his hand. “Three mint juleps.”

Stevie scowled slightly but disappeared back into the house.

Winny mopped his tanned brow with a cream-colored handkerchief. “Why don’t we retire to the upstairs porch? It’ll be cooler there.”

We followed him through the swinging screen door into the front hall. A bright formal living room was on one side. Opposite was a large office with dark wood and brass trimmings. An oriental runner ran down the hall toward the back of the house.

In that direction Bartholow yelled, “Stevie, we’ll be upstairs on the porch.”

Winny hiked up the staircase and we followed him, passing through a library or study. The room was more rich dark wood accented by forest green curtains and dark green leather chairs. Ornate paintings of hunting dogs and horses hung on the walls. Silver-framed pictures of parties, horses, and friends covered every available tabletop and bookshelf.

Double French doors opened onto an upstairs porch. French windows, screwed all the way open to let in what little air there was, wrapped the porch. Two ceiling fans sailed noiselessly above. Adirondack oak-framed furniture, designed to look casual, finished the effect.

Winnie sat down in one of the chairs, stretching his legs out onto a matching ottoman. “Well, Judge Tony, what can I do for you?” he asked genially.

“As you know Lee McAllister disappeared last week under very suspicious circumstances.”

Winnie clucked sympathetically. “You mentioned. Do you have any more information?”

I didn’t answer his question. “McAllister told his wife that he had an informant and that he knew why you had Mistral murdered. I think he was on the verge of proving that you were substituting some other stallion’s sperm for Mistral’s.”

Chuckling Winnie settled further into his big chair. “So that’s what all the telephone calls were about. That’s hilarious. A breeding scheme.” Guffawing, he rolled his head back, just as Stevie arrived with our drinks. “Stevie, Judge Tony thinks someone has been using transport semen for Mistral’s mares.”

Holmes snorted a derisive laugh as he set down the tray, on which had been sprinkled colorful flower petals. On it were three mint juleps in cut crystal glasses and a bowl of dry-roasted peanuts. “Transport semen,” he repeated, giggling.

Undeterred by their amusement, I kept pressing forward. “Out of curiosity, I started calling the same numbers Lee McAllister had been telephoning in the last two days before he vanished.”

Winnie arched his eyebrows with a pained expression. “I know.”

Keeping Bartholow in my gaze, I continued, "It's interesting, not a single foal inherited Mistral's gentle disposition. Now you would think, that at least one out of his hundreds of progeny would possess his personality."

Stevie shook his head in disbelief. "Winnie," he said, "I've got more important things to do than to listen to this silliness." Then, hands at his hips, he announced, "And I am not going to deal with the Carruthers alone."

Winnie took a small sip of his drink. "The mint juleps are very good," he answered, lifting his glass in Stevie's direction.

Holmes looked daggers at Bartholow and slatted off the porch. Winnie smiled apologetically as one might for a fresh child.

LL took a sip of his mint julep and smiled in appreciation. "This is delicious. What's in it?"

"Crushed mint, sugar, and sour mash."

"Sour mash?" LL inquired, peering lovingly into his glass.

"Bourbon."

LL's eyes brightened with recognition. "Whiskey?"

Winnie looked sincerely perplexed or supercilious. I wasn't sure which. "No, sour mash," he explained again.

LL finished the rest of his mint julep, a marvelous, albeit still mysterious, concoction. The conversation lapsed awkwardly. Winnie took a handful of peanuts and, eating them one at a time, surveyed us. I let the silence linger.

When Winnie started to say something, I cut him off. "Another young stallion named Machote died a few months before Mistral?"

“I wouldn’t know,” he answered, his forehead pursing into a question mark as if he were trying to recollect.

“I looked it up,” I said. “Machote was a pretty good stallion. I mean you paid over two million for him right before you put Mistral out to stud.”

“You have to understand that Bartholow Farms owns hundreds of horses and hundreds more pass through our hands each year. I don’t remember how much we paid for Machote or when we purchased him.” Winny was becoming impatient, his tone crisper.

“Here’s where it gets really interesting,” I said. “A syndicate of Bartholow Farms pays two million for a fine stallion like Machote and then, according to Equineline-dot-com reports, he’s never heard from again. Never races. Never breeds. That’s an awful lot of money for a pasture ornament.”

Winny shifted in his chair and reached for some peanuts. “I’d have to check. That doesn’t sound right to me.”

“I’ve already checked. Equineline doesn’t list a single foal out of Machote.”

“I have difficulty believing that.”

“What we do know is that four years ago Bartholow Farms wasn’t doing so great, but it did possess one of the greatest stallions ever. Then on the eve of Mistral going out to stud, you buy Machote. Maybe not in the same league as Mistral but a quality stallion nonetheless. Machote goes into the stallion barn, but holy-moly, he never mates. Why, I wonder.”

“You’re jumping to conclusions that are utter nonsense. For more reasons than you could ever understand.” Winny spoke more confidently and if he took offense, he did a remarkable job of hiding it. “But I’m not quite sure where this conversation is going.”

“When Machote died, probably of natural causes, you had to get rid of Mistral. He couldn’t produce any offspring, and with Machote gone, you couldn’t artificially inseminate the mares with his semen. Machote’s death certificate was Mistral’s death warrant.”

Winnie’s face reddened with anger. “I’m not going to sit here and have my integrity insulted. If you keep going with this, I’ll see you in court, and believe me it won’t be pleasant.”

I didn’t move. “That’s too bad, because I was hoping we could work some kind of deal.”

“Deal? Deal what?” Bartholow chuckled. “You haven’t got one fact to support this cockamamie theory of yours. Now, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

I remained seated. LL looked over at me, his face aglow with anticipation and pleasure. “Well, actually I do. You see I have some of Mistral’s mane hairs.”

The color washed out of Winnie’s face, but he quickly recovered, cocking his head with curiosity. He took a sip from his mint julep. “You have some of Mistral’s mane hairs?” he asked, his modulation tightly controlled.

LL was on the edge of his seat.

“Well, yes,” I answered, enjoying his discomfort.

Winnie collected himself. “You don’t have any hair,” he challenged.

“Okay, then, maybe we should leave.” I started to rise, and motioned for LL to get up also.

“Why don’t you tell me how you acquired some of Mistral’s horsehair?”

Feeling the light tug of a fish’s first nibble, I leaned forward, forearms on my knees. “My wife made Brittany a plume for her helmet out of Mistral’s mane hair. It vanished when her horse tripped,” I added. “The plume didn’t use all the hair Brittany had taken from Mistral and my wife had forgotten that she had stuck the rest in an envelope at the bottom of her

sewing basket. She thought of it after I told her how Lee McAllister had collected assorted horse hairs stuck to Brittany's knapsack."

"Where is it now?" Winny asked innocently.

"In two envelopes, each one containing photocopies of all my research and my conclusions. If anything should happen to either of us, then those letters will go to the police and The Jockey Club."

Stevie Holmes reappeared. "The Carruthers are waiting," he whined.

"Inform the Carruthers I will be there in a few minutes," Winny ordered in a steady voice. Stevie gave him an arched look of warning, but did as directed. Winny leaned back in his chair. "What are you proposing to do with it?"

"I really haven't made up my mind. I need to think about it."

"Perhaps you could favor me with the direction of your thinking."

"Like I said, I was contemplating some kind of deal, maybe a straight sale, but I haven't really worked it all out yet. I'd have to be satisfied that I can trust you," I said, tantalizing him some more.

"Likewise," he said.

I rose and LL followed suit. "I'll call you tomorrow or the next day," I said. "To let you know where I stand." I reached out and shook Winny's hand goodbye.

But Bartholow held onto my hand, preventing me from leaving. "How do I know you actually have the hair? You easily could have brought a sample."

I paused as if this idea surprised me. "I didn't think of that. Probably should have, but remember I'm new to all this."

Winny hadn't let go and his eyes hadn't left my face. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"That's easy. You can always trust a judge," I answered, and we all laughed.

* * *

As soon as LL shifted from reverse to drive, he said, “You don’t really have any of Mistral’s hair, do you?”

I waited for a second, until we were past Bartholow’s house, before I dared expose the smile that had been welling up. “No.”

“I knew it!” LL grinned like a teacher whose pupil has just won the debate. “And ‘you can always trust a judge.’ That’s right up there with ‘of course I’ll respect you in the morning.’”

“You will?”

“No! And I won’t trust you in the morning either.”

LL glided down the blue stone drive. The heat and humidity of the day had softened slightly, and the air that flowed into the convertible caressed like fresh cotton. I wanted to look back, imagining I would see Winny, hopping mad, screaming at Stevie, and as frightened as I had been on Rattlesnake Ridge. But my pride was matched by my fear. My plan was in motion, and the first gambit had clearly succeeded. Now momentum ruled, and we were merely along for the ride. I didn’t know how it was going to end. But I did know that Bartholow played in the big leagues, and he had already demonstrated he was without scruples or conscience.

For the rest of the trip back to Opal, I explained my plan, step by step, giving LL a list of the equipment I needed and asking him if he could see any fault, something I had overlooked.

“I like it, but are you sure Jen wants to go through with it?”

“She was at the knacker’s, too, don’t forget. Plus, I’d never hear the end of it if I tried to prevent her.” I chuckled and shook my head just imagining her reaction.

“That girl’s all wool and a yard wide.”

I invited LL to stay for dinner, but he declined. In our driveway before exiting the car, I said, “Jen’s going to be disappointed.”

“I told Rosemary I’d see her when her shift ends, and I need to make some calls to get that stuff you want.”

“Have it your way,” I said, opening the door.

LL looked like he wanted to say something else, and I held the door. “It’s a clever idea,” he said. “Real clever, but you know our lives now depend on Bartholow’s falling for this bluff of yours.”

“He will. He’s got too much at stake not to.”

He looked over at me briefly, his lips pressed into a straight line. “I hope so, because right now we’re hanging by a horse hair.”

* * *

That night I was too jazzed up to sleep and too exhausted not to. Despite being certain I wouldn’t fall asleep, I went to bed at the same time as Jen and we both read for a while. When she turned off her reading light, I turned off mine as well. After a fruitless twenty minutes of flexing and relaxing groups of muscles in precise rhythm to my breathing, I was no closer to sleep. Jen lay quietly, asleep I thought. I tried to remain still, but after only a few minutes every position became an uncomfortable obstacle to rest. Shifting and twisting, I would rearrange myself, trying to find the combination that would allow me to drift off.

Earlier that year my youngest sister Lucy had gone on and on about organizing her home and furnishings in accordance with the principles of Feng Shui. When she explained that if your house faced a hill, it suppresses energy, but a convex mirror that turns the image of the hill upside down neutralizes its negative flow, she lost me. Jen had borrowed her book to see if

we should have been doing something to promote conception. She had been vaguely smitten with the principles, but I couldn't recall if she had made any changes in our home. Flipping and flopping like a fish, I remembered Lucy talking about how much better she and her husband slept after they moved their bed. If I could have remembered the principle—Against a solid wall? Facing east?—I might have shifted our bed right then with Jen in it.

“Can't you sleep?” she asked, apparently enduring my tossing and turning stoically.

“No,” I answered, rolling angrily into a new position.

“You want to make love?” she asked sleepily and indifferently.

“No,” I said, flopping onto my back.

“Let me lie on top of you.” Jen pulled herself onto me, her head under my chin, her paralyzed legs between mine, and her hands pinning down my forearms. Like a tight hug for a hysterical child, her weight comforted me, and I could feel the tension drain out of my body. Feng phooey.

“Better?” she whispered.

“Yeah.” I broke her grip and embraced her, pulling her body tighter against mine.

“Probably just as well about the lovemaking. In another week or so my BBT should spike. You need to save your strength for our baby-dancing fest.” She straightened her head out to give me a teasing peck on the chest.

“Don't worry about me,” I replied, and was about to say, “Remember, I'm your Italian stallion,” but it no longer seemed witty.

We laid there in silence, her body pressed against mine. As Jen's breathing lengthened and softened, my mind moved from our efforts at conception to Winny's breeding scam. I pondered Mistral, day after day, compelled by some monster gene—a present from God or a

curse attached to the gift of propagation?—to mount mare after mare? Was the drive a genetic desire to procreate, lust, or just hedonism? My mind floated.

Jen's need to have a baby? It couldn't be physical; she couldn't feel anything. Was it the same for the mares? A compulsion to conceive so strong that it trumped every other urge. The mare and stallion ready to kick down fences to get at one another. Were all the emotional ups and downs Jen and I had survived nothing more than the mother of all genes or the gene of all mothers, demanding, insisting, that she become pregnant, that she reproduce? Was Jen's seducing, rationalizing, crying, begging, threatening, whining, bartering, no different from the mare attempting to kick down the fence? Not real emotions, but a primeval demand to regenerate the species.

Did men too have some dominant gene directing our lives toward reproduction? Were Casanova and LL better protectors of our species, with their unbridled desires and unconstrained morals, and their single-minded devotion to bedding every member of the opposite sex they encountered? Where did I fit in? Certainly not in Mistral's or LL's categories. I considered myself a rational participant. Jen had persuaded me to have a child; we agreed, and I was determined—well, had been until lousy sperm had weakened my resolve—to make her pregnant. Or did my monster gene create that intellectual deceit to conceal the real truth. It wasn't just the baby I was after. I didn't want her conceiving with someone else's sperm, so it wasn't the idea of adding one more child to the World that motivated me. No, I had my own drives. More complex than LL's, but in their own way just as compelling.

In another week I'd be back in the saddle, depositing “not-so-good-as-we-might-have-wished” sperm into a vagina without sensation, hoping to create a child I wanted and Jen coveted. When my desire would wane, as I was sure it would, Jen would seduce, cajole,

manipulate me to do what her genes demanded. Like Mistral I would do it twice a day without knowing quite why, driven by some genetic imprint designed by God or the devil.

They say that ninety-seven percent of every animal's genes are identical. Do we share a common gene combination that demands propagation? Are Jen and I no different from Mistral and a strange mare, from LL and Rosemary, the praying mantis and her victim? And all the emotions and feelings that go into any relationship, marriage or a one-night stand, love, caring, lust, caresses, orgasms, are they only genetic sleights of hand to beguile us into believing that somehow we control those urges, that destiny is ours to shape?

How many creatures conceived that day? I imagined all over the globe the microscopic embryos of mares, rabbits, ants, women, hamsters, and fruit flies, cleaving, splitting, duplicating, and regenerating. Two cells, four cells, eight cells....

Thursday

I wanted to leave Bartholow hanging for a while so I had waited a couple of days to call him. When he bit, I wanted a solid strike—hook, line, and sinker. We'd picked Thursday after work to contact him. LL had taken the day off to get what we needed, and when I arrived home from court, he was already there, drinking a beer at the picnic table with Jen.

"We're you able to get everything?" I asked, tossing my suit coat over the back of a vacant lawn chair.

"Yes, but don't ask where. Fortunately, I still have a few friends in high places."

"Anybody have second thoughts?"

Both Jen and LL shook their heads, "no."

"Okay, let's go."

When LL had finished setting up the tape recorder, I dialed Bartholow Farms. Jen and LL hovered anxiously as the phone rang. Winny was unavailable, and I left a message for him to call me back. I had gone to fetch a beer for myself and another for LL and had barely returned to the table when the phone rang. I was pretty certain it wasn't Winny. Too quick, I thought.

But when I picked up, it was him, his tone smooth and relaxed, although I couldn't imagine him being any less nervous than the three of us. For ultimately, he had a lot more at stake. "Judge Tony, they said you called."

"Yes. I've decided to make you a proposition. A way for you to get Mistral's hair back and for us to make a little money."

"I'm listening."

"First, I haven't started to yet, but in a moment I'll be tape recording our conversation."

Winny was silent for a second, and then asked, "Why?"

“Because this telephone call will incriminate me for extortion, and as a sign of my good faith, I’m going to give the tape to you.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“You will. I’m going to start recording now.” LL pushed the button. I laid out for Winny what we had discovered. “I don’t know how you did it, but this bit of Mistral’s hair has got enough DNA to prove that none of his progeny are really his. He was sterile from the get-go. And the horse owners who’ve paid millions to mate their mares with him haven’t been getting the real goods. It’s probably the biggest breeding fraud ever.”

I was pretty sure my theory of Bartholow’s scam was accurate, how it worked and why Mistral’s hair was so valuable and dangerous at the same time, but only fools are absolutely certain, and I worried that in the midst of spelling out the scheme to Winny, he would break into hysterical guffaws, puncturing the hypothesis I had so carefully assembled. But with each passing minute of silence at his end, I became more and more certain that I was on the right track. When I finished, Bartholow hadn’t disputed a thing I said. He hadn’t even opened his mouth.

“Here’s the deal,” I continued. “I will sell you all of Mistral’s hair for one million dollars. Cash. In addition, I will give you a tape of this conversation. That way I will never be able to double-cross you, either by revealing your fraud or trying to blackmail you in the future for more money. It’ll be a one-time deal.”

The phone was silent as the tape recorder continued to whirl. Finally, Winny said, “It’s all very intriguing. We should get together sometime again. I’ll have Stevie make us a pitcher of mint juleps.”

“This is a business proposition,” I replied firmly. “I’m not angling for an invitation.”

“How do I know you have some of Mistral’s hair?” he asked.

“I’m going to bring it with me. You’ll be able to see it for yourself.”

“I’d like to see it before we talk.”

“Winny, I’m going to make this real clear for the last time. I will sell you Mistral’s hair for one million dollars. Are you interested or not?”

The phone line was quiet for a second. “Why don’t you come by tomorrow evening, six o’clock?”

“Look, I’m not traveling down there for peanuts and another mint julep. I’m only coming if you’re willing to accept my proposition.” I wanted a commitment from him on the tape. Even if the rest of my plan fell through, that would be damning enough.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be prepared,” he responded vaguely.

“Are you sure you can raise a million dollars by then?”

Winny laughed, breaking the tension. “Cash is never a problem in the horse business, Judge Tony. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I hung up. LL replayed the tape.

Jen observed, “He really didn’t commit himself, did he?”

LL said, “He’s smart enough not to incriminate himself, but if he wasn’t interested, he’d just blow us off.”

“There’s only one problem left,” I said. “We still don’t have any of Mistral’s hair.”

Friday

Bartholow's eagerness to meet with us had thrown me a curve. I'd banked on having a couple of days to locate some mane hair the same color as Mistral's. I called Ralph early the next morning and pretended to have a bad summer cold. It was the first time I'd ever skipped a day of court. Knowing in advance he wouldn't be needed, LL had spent the night at Rosemary's and wasn't ready to look for horsehair until nearly lunchtime. In the meantime I made a list of horse farms, riding academies, and stables from the yellow pages.

After putting Jen's portable hand controls in the cargo area, I drove her RAV4—I didn't want someone seeing my judicial license plates touring around the seacoast during working hours. We meandered from horse farms to riding academies without finding anything close. About mid-afternoon we arrived at a country gentleman's farm in Milton, stonewall in front, old white colonial, and horses in back.

I stopped to examine the horses.

"Anything close?" she asked.

"That one in the middle is, but Mistral was darker, more chestnutty," I said and started up again.

By four we still hadn't had any luck. We had probably looked at a hundred horses, but none appeared quite right to me. Having been bounced around in the car for three and a half hours and with time dwindling, Jen and LL were becoming impatient with my seemingly exacting requirements. But I had enough sense to know that close wouldn't get us through the door. We were driving along a dusty dirt road that ran through a bog, headed for a stable in Kingston. Every few hundred yards there would be sufficient high ground to support a trailer or singlewide but nothing else.

We came to an unpainted, half-tarpapered shack set on a slightly elevated hummock. Behind the house was a small corral with two underfed, sway-backed horses, too weary to even wave their tails at the flies.

I said, "That one on the right might just do the trick."

As soon as I slowed down, a big filthy mutt, barking wildly, stretched his chain in our direction. The dirt yard displayed a fine collection of New Hampshire lawn ornaments: two snowmobiles, an automobile engine, a dirt bike, children's toys, scrap lumber, and three lawn chairs. A three hundred pound woman, whose slack breasts rested on top of her gargantuan belly, studied us from behind a screen door.

"If that horse looks like Mistral, I'm Julia Roberts," said Jen.

"The color is really close," I said.

LL jumped out of the car and walked toward the house, holding his hands palm out to show he meant no harm.

"Those are beautiful horses. Are they for sale?"

"Who's askin'?" she answered lazily.

"Lionel LaCasse. See that pretty woman in the backseat?" Jen shyly waved. "We have a daughter who's crazy about horses." Jen and I exchanged helpless, here-he-goes-again expressions. "You have any daughters?" LL asked, as if he hoped she'd invite him for a cup of coffee and a visit.

She was having none of it. "What business is it of yours?"

"None," he answered without offense. "I only thought with those lovely horses that you probably had some daughters who liked to ride." He stopped at the edge of the yard, the dog continuing to yelp at him.

The woman hadn't moved from behind the screen door. "Give it a rest, Bruiser."

“Would you be willing to sell that one on the right?” She couldn’t see which one LL meant, and it looked to us as if he was trying to get her out of the house.

“Depends.”

“How much are you asking?”

“How much ya payin’?” she countered, opening the screen door about halfway.

LL rubbed his chin and studied the horse. “T’d be willing to go as high as two thousand.”

She nearly choked repeating the number. “Two thousand!” She moved to the front step and leaned against the house, appraising LL. Her blue tent dress was stained and filthy.

“I’ll tell you what,” LL said. “Let me take a clip of his—”

“Used to be a his,” she interjected, “but now he’s an ‘it,’ if you get my drift.”

“Sure, sure, not a problem. Makes ‘em more docile. What I’d like to do is—”

“Whaddaya mean, docile?” she demanded.

“You know, makes ‘em calm. Calms them down.”

“Just the mention of it settles most men down.” She cackled, and I couldn’t see any teeth. Straining at his chain, Bruiser continued to issue high-pitched barks that hurt our ears. The woman raised her fist and shook it at the dog. Tipping his tail between his legs, Bruiser silently slunk into his doghouse.

“Let me take a clip of his...its mane to show my daughter. I’m sure she’ll love it, and I’ll come back in an hour or so with the money and our horse trailer.”

“Two thousand,” she repeated, savoring the number.

“Right,” LL said. “It’ll just take a second.” Threading his way through the scattered junk, he headed for the two horses.

“Take all you want,” she offered, walking to the corner of her Appalachian manor so she could watch him.

LL clipped a hunk of mane and, thanking her profusely, walked rapidly back to the car and jumped in.

“See ya in an hour,” she yelled after us.

“In a pig’s eye,” LL muttered, holding out the hair for me to examine. “Whadda you think?” he asked.

“It’s real dusty,” I replied, “but it’s got the color nailed.”

He handed the clump to Jen to look at. “It’s filthy,” she observed, rubbing the hair between her fingers. “Unless you plan on shampooing and drying it before you meet Bartholow, I wouldn’t use this.”

“We’ll find a better one,” I said. “But hold onto this just in case.”

We visited the stable in Kingston and then a riding academy, but still couldn’t find what I would have considered a perfect match. It was close to five, and were wending our way north toward Portsmouth and Bartholow Farms. While we continued to search, Jen separated the dirty hair and tried to clean each strand on her pants as best she could. From time to time she would glance up and frown, certain that the hair was too dirty to pass Winny’s inspection.

LL must have seen her discouraged expression because he said, “Don’t worry, he probably won’t even notice.”

“We’d better get going,” I said. “We’ve still got a lot to do.”

We were about twenty minutes from Bartholow Farm, driving through Stratham on old Route 101, when Jen said, “Look, over there!” It was the mother lode of horses, at least thirty of them.

“Jesus,” LL exclaimed.

I pulled off at the next exit, and we worked our way back until we found the horse farm. According to the sign, there wasn't anything they didn't offer. Trail rides, pony rides, hayrides, riding lessons, boarding, breeding, saddlery, you name it. There was a single, one-story stable, cheaply built with rough boards, two riding rings, one with various horse jumps, and a modest residence. A couple of children were riding in one ring and the dusty parking lot was about half full. We drove in and parked next to the paddock where the horses were. I got out and searched for one with Mistral's colors.

I spotted what I thought was Mistral's twin, a beautiful dark chestnut with a black mane. "That's the one right over there."

A man dressed in overalls with work gloves came up to us. "Can I help you?"

After introductions, LL began the same malarkey, that he and Jen had a daughter—this time he gave her a name, Lily—who loved horses and as a birthday present they wanted to get her one, but it had to be a certain color. "I can't tell from here—but is he or she for sale?" LL pointed at Mistral's twin.

"It's a he," the man answered, "and—"

"See, I told you it was a male," LL said to me, showing off but also conveying that he thought that being the same sex as Mistral was a good sign.

The man continued, "He's real gentle, wants to please."

"Could we take a clip of his mane?" LL asked. "Only to show Lily the color."

"I don't see why not." The farmer walked over to the gate, entered the corral, and returned with the horse. "Say hello to Bosun Mate," he said.

"Hello there, pal," LL responded, running a hand along his neck. "You're going to love our little Lily." With his other hand, he produced his pocketknife, and while the man in the overalls held Bosun Mate, LL trimmed off a hank of mane. Not done, LL insisted I write down

the man's name, his telephone number, as he assured him he would be back with his daughter Lily the next day.

* * *

I had hoped there would have been enough time to go to our house or LL's apartment to get ready, but that wasn't to be. Fortunately we had everything we needed with us. We drove to a public parking lot at Rye Beach, where departing beachgoers had left plenty of empty spaces. We parked in one that was slightly out of the way and began preparing for our meeting with Winny. LL showed me how to tape the miniature microphone right above my belt buckle.

"They'll feel the buckle and never notice the mike." He handed me the two-inch by one-inch black transmitter. "Tape it behind your balls. They'll never pat you down there."

I tried to hand him the tape and transmitter. "You tape it behind your balls!"

"Don't think I haven't given this some thought." He Michael Jackson'ed his crotch. "But with this equipment, I don't have the room."

"Can't you ever stop," I protested, still trying to jam the tape and transmitter into his free hand.

"Besides, I'm a boxer man and you're briefs. Briefs'll conceal it better."

Behind him, Jen smirked, and I knew I'd lost. Resigned, I returned to the car where Jen was getting herself ready. Sitting in the back seat next to her, I lowered my pants and began to tape the transmitter behind my testicles.

Leaning on the car and politely looking away, LL said, "Whatever you do, don't fart."

"LL," Jen scolded.

"You'll blow up the whole plan."

“Very funny.” I pulled my pants up. The corners of the transmitter jabbed uncomfortably into my crotch.

Jen and LL began to arrange her equipment in the cargo area of her Toyota RAV4, a receiver and tape recorder for my body wire, cell phone to contact the police, and LL’s gun. He was showing her how the receiver and microcassette recorder worked. “The effective range is only four hundred yards. Beyond that, reception is real dicey.”

“Are you sure you still want to do this?” I asked.

“I’ll be fine. I’m going to be a lot safer hidden in my own car than you two are. At least, I can drive away.” She rolled her wheelchair over to where she could hold my hand. “If you think it’s too risky for me, then we should call the whole thing off.”

“It’ll go fine,” I said.

“Not to worry,” LL rejoined.

“Promise you won’t do anything foolish,” Jen said.

I leaned down to kiss her. “I promise.”

She wheeled to the back of the Toyota, lifted herself out of her chair, and crawled into the cargo area. She organized her stuff and curled herself into a small mound. I covered her with the blanket, placed two cardboard cartons on top, and leaned the wheelchair against all of that.

On the way to Bartholow Farms, I tried speaking in different directions and volumes in order for Jen to get her recorder and earphones set correctly. As we pulled onto the long drive, LL gave her some last minute instructions. “As soon as we’ve got him on tape, call the police. And whatever you do, don’t come out from under that blanket for anyone other than Tony or me.”

“Got it,” we heard from back of the car.

* * *

Bartholow Farm looked idyllic: green grass, white board fences, the handsome colonial, and behind it, brown and red barns and stables. It was hard to imagine this was the hub of a fraudulent horse-breeding scheme of almost incalculable scope, where murder was part of the recipe.

I swung into the main house's parking area and pulled into an open spot. LL carried the cassette of my telephone conversation with Winny and a tape recorder. I carried the horsehair in an envelope and a second recorder. As I walked around the rear of the car, I nonchalantly tapped on the rear door and whispered toward my belt buckle, "I love you."

Jason Klingman, Brittany's riding instructor, and another slim young horseman met us at the front walk. Seeing Klingman grabbed my gut and set off a rush of hot blood. All his crying and carrying on about Brittany, and here he was part of Bartholow's gang and probably the son of a bitch who had tripped her horse. I snorted my disgust to myself, afterwards realizing that poor Jen had probably heard the snort amplified five times. Although it was warm, each wore a vest. "Welcome judge," Klingman said amiably. "Winny's waiting on the upstairs porch."

The Farm had quieted down some. Stable hands and riders were leading horses into the barns and stables. A couple of cars leaving the Farm passed behind us on the main drive. If anyone had been watching, they would have paid no attention to four men, two dressed in riding breeches, strolling up the walk to the main house.

As soon as the door closed behind us, Klingman's tenor changed. Pulling a handgun from under his vest, he commanded, "Face the wall, hands on it!" From the corner of my eye, I could see that Klingman's cohort had also drawn his gun, a small, silver revolver. As LL had

predicted, Klingman patted us down. His palms moved down my flanks and then up the inside of my legs. I could feel my body involuntarily twitch and hoped that Klingman would think it was his touch rather than nerves. But Klingman stopped right below my privates and never came close to the wire. LL shot me a satisfied glance. Following behind, Klingman directed us up the stairs and onto the second floor porch.

Winnie sat in the same chair, his legs relaxing on the ottoman. Stevie Holmes, the farm manager, sat at the far end of the sofa. Klingman and his buddy ushered us into the room and, remaining outside, closed the door behind us. I could feel the air from the overhead fan on my clammy neck and face. There were only two places left to sit. LL sat on the sofa between Winnie and Stevie, and I sat in a chair across the coffee table from LL.

“Would you like that mint julep I promised?” Winnie offered expansively.

“I don’t think so,” I croaked.

“Just as well. This won’t take long,” Winnie said, a cocktail smile fixed on his face. “Do you have it?”

I held up the envelope. Winnie leaned forward to reach for it, and I pulled it away. “Not so fast,” I said, having found my voice. I nodded at LL.

He removed the blank tape from the recorder and inserted the cassette of my call to Winnie. When it finished playing, LL ejected the tape and handed it to Winnie.

I said, “Transferring that over to you proves that we mean business and no harm. That tape in the wrong hands spells the end of my career as a judge or lawyer and the end of LL’s police retirement. It would result in extortion and blackmail charges against us and a certain conviction. It’s in your hands now. If we ever double-cross you, you’ve got your revenge right there.”

Bartholow glanced over at Stevie who returned a slight, go-ahead nod. “A million dollars for the hair?” Winny asked.

“And you’ll never hear from us again.”

Winny flipped the audiotape from one side to the other in his hand, staring down at it, trying to assess the whole situation. “Okay,” he said, “let’s see the hair.”

“We need one more thing,” I said.

“What do you mean?” Winny asked skeptically.

“The tape of me on the phone does us no good if you try to double-cross us. To balance it off, we need an incriminating tape from you. Not a lot, just enough to keep the teeter-totter level.”

Winny stared hard. “I’m about to give you a million dollars. In cash. That seems more than enough consideration to me.”

“Look at it from our point of view. Without an incriminating tape from you, the second we walk out of here,” I continued, “you could destroy the tape, burn Mistral’s mane, and tell the police that we blackmailed you, or even that we just plain robbed you to the tune of a million dollars. The police would seize the money before we reached home. We want a Mexican standoff, where neither side dares double-cross the other. That’s why we gave you the tape.” I gestured at the cassette Winny was still nervously spinning in his hand.

Again there was a long pause while Winny thought it over.

I said, “If we leave right now, you’ll have the tape, but we’ll still have Mistral’s hair.”

Winny and Stevie looked at each other. Finally Winny pursed his lips and rolled his hands outward to signal that he thought it was all right.

“Here’s how it works,” I explained. “You tell us how the Mistral scheme worked, what happened to Lee McAllister...and as a personal favor, I’d like to know how my niece Brittany

was hurt. Then we'll record the trade of the hair for the money on the tape. We'll make two tapes, one for you and one for us. That way we hold each other in a mutual death grip. Either lets go, and we all fall down."

Winnie smiled, pleased with the concept. "Let me see the hair first."

"And you show us the money."

Winnie called out to Jason Klingman, who opened the door, saw Winnie's nod, disappeared for a moment, and returned with a brown canvas duffle bag. He set it down on the coffee table, unzipped it, and spread it open. Stacks and stacks of hundreds and fifties. More money than I had ever seen in my entire life.

Winnie noticed my astonishment. "When you asked if it would be a problem putting together a million dollars in a day, I almost laughed out loud. Cash, and lots of it, is the lifeblood of the horse business."

For a second I imagined that this was all real, not a charade, and that LL and I were about to walk out of there with a million dollars. I thought of what Jen and I could do with it. A swimming pool for her. A new Saab for me. Then I saw Brittany stumbling through life, trying to recall words that a five year old could remember, and the face of Horrie Byam, an old hermit who'd never bothered anyone, and the temptation vanished like a popped soap bubble.

"May I see the hair?" Winnie asked.

"Let's talk first."

"I'm not saying anything until I see the hair."

"Okay," I said and started to get up.

"Is it in that envelope?" he asked, pointing at it in my hand.

"Yes," I said, standing but not moving.

“What was it that you said? You can always trust a judge.” Chortling nervously, he motioned for me to sit down. “Jason, I will have a mint julep. Anyone care to join me?”

LL and I shook our heads.

“Stevie?” Winny asked.

“Yes, love one,” he answered, exchanging cloying glances with Winny.

Jason left to get the drinks and Bartholow said, “Fire away, Judge Tony.”

Winny was remarkably loquacious and forthright. My suspicions, or I should say Lee McAllister’s, that Mistral was sterile and Bartholow purchased Machote to substitute his semen for Mistral, were right on the mark. Winny, who had been a Steward of The Jockey Club at the time, bribed a low level functionary to swap the DNA results of the two stallions.

“We paid him a thousand dollars every time one of Mistral’s foals was registered,” he said. “Good money for him and a small price for us.”

By then Winny had his mint julep and actually seemed to relish telling the story. When he got to McAllister, his tale took a shocking twist from what I had expected. “McAllister didn’t give a toot about a breeding scheme. He was after the Posse.” I recollected Lee’s venomous opinion of criminals who would kill horses for money. “When Mac O’Farrell told him that we were the Posse—”

“*You’re* the Posse?”

Winny opened his arms, palms up, in an expansive manner. “You’re looking at them.”

The Posse had begun five years earlier, almost by accident. One of Bartholow Farm’s syndicates was doing poorly. To put some cash in the pipeline, Winny had a trusted associate break the leg of a racing Thoroughbred who wasn’t living up to expectations.

“The insurance was over nine hundred thousand,” he explained. “Doesn’t sound like much now, but back then it was a huge boost.”

The next year, to jack up the bottom-line of another syndicate, Winny had two more horses killed for the insurance. Rumors started and another breeder contacted Winny, inquiring if he could help him get rid of one of his horses. Not wanting to implicate himself, Winny told the breeder that he used a group called the Posse—a name he had thought up on the spur of the moment—that they were very secretive, but he would see if he could get a telephone number. At that moment the Posse was born, and it went on to earn millions from insurance scams.

“All cash. All tax free,” he added. “You see, a breeding scheme didn’t hurt McAllister’s company at all. Equine Assurance could have cared less about the pedigree of a living Thoroughbred. But the Posse and Equine had something in common: we were both only interested in dead horses. Well, as time went on, we were killing them financially, so to speak, and they could never solve the puzzle.” Winny smiled like a businessman who’s just announced increased profits for the year.

“What happened to McAllister?”

“Yes, well, that was unfortunate, but he wouldn’t stop.”

“Was O’Farrell his informant?”

“Sadly for Mac, that’s true.” Winny shrugged as if there was nothing he could do.

Winny took pleasure in telling the story, as if he wanted to share its brilliance. But when he got to where the scheme started to unravel, his voice became less chipper and more wistful. “Rumors started. Rumors are inevitable in the horse business. At horse sales, horse races, there is always endless suspicion and gossip. And, unfortunately, sometimes it is true. But a year ago good breeders started to complain about the quality of Mistral’s get, saying that not one in fifty had Mistral’s conformation or speed. I even heard that the registrar at The Jockey Club had received a couple of anonymous complaints, but he refused to investigate.

“Stevie and I—” Stevie nodded his confirmation “—decided that after this past winter’s breeding season we would have to stop the charade, and put down Machote and Mistral. We increased the insurance and you know the rest.”

“Where is Mistral now?” LL asked.

“We buried him here on the farm, in shady spot under a tree. Buried him like a true champion, head, heart, and hooves. The rest we cremated. He was a wonderful animal. God, how I loved him.”

Winnie had talked a lot more than I had expected or could have hoped for. By then I figured that Jen, having heard more than enough, had called the police, but I still wanted the answer to one question. “What happened to Brittany?”

Bartholow’s expression wilted and his earlier pleasure evaporated. He turned slightly to face me more directly. “I am truly sorry about that. We never intended that she would be hurt. One of my men tried to snatch it off Brittany’s helmet while she was out riding, but no luck. Then, we tried to steal it out of your house—”

“The burglary,” I blurted.

“Yes,” he admitted as if it were as unimportant as spilled milk. “At that point, if we repeated either of those ploys, and the horsehair was to suddenly disappear from her helmet, someone would have become suspicious. We really didn’t have any options left. She was only trotting,” he explained. “And Jason was right there when he tripped her horse, but she fell directly on her head, and the damn horse panicked and kicked her.” He paused, his face sagging with sadness. “That I will truly regret. Brittany was one of the most beloved riders out here.” Winnie’s voice drifted off. “That’s enough.”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” I mumbled, thinking about Brittany, McAllister’s wife and girls, Mac O’Farrell, even Horrie Byam. Although the price was high, Bartholow had in effect set a dollar

value on the life of each one of them. Was it twenty million? Forty? A hundred? Would he have killed all of them for twenty thousand? Ten thousand? Gazing at him, I wondered how he could coolly equate their deaths and Brittany's injury as justified expenses, merely part of doing business.

"I'll take the hair now," he ordered.

I leaned forward and handed him the envelope to him. Winny fanned out the envelope so he could see the horsehair inside. My guts were melting into a slippery mess. LL looked at me, his face drawn with concern. Winny's ruddy round face broke into a joyous grin, as if his problems had all fallen off the train. "Stevie," he said, still beaming with pleasure. "You're going to love looking at this. A bunch of Thoroughbred hair has never looked as good as this."

I drew a relieved breath and watched LL settle back on the sofa. We were almost home.

Stevie walked behind my chair to get a look. Winny pulled open the envelope. Peering in, Stevie's forehead furrowed. Then sharing a glance with Winny, a broad grin spread across his face. "That's Mistral's hair all right!"

LL rewound his tape recorder a little and played back a bit to make sure it had picked up Winny's confession. He handed the cassette to Winny and pulled the tape from my machine and stuffed it in his pocket.

Just then Winny flipped the envelope over, spilling out the hair, which he scattered by blowing them away like dandelion feathers. That greasy feeling in my gut came roaring back. I turned away from Bartholow to reach for the duffle bag. Hovering above it was Stevie's hand, holding a small caliber revolver.

God, I hoped the police were on their way. "You're joking, right?" I asked.

"No," Bartholow replied, his voice even. "You're the ones who thought you could play a little joke on us." Onto the porch came Klingman, the other horseman, and a new thug, their

guns trained on LL and me. The third guy was the shooter from the knacker's, his thick forearms blue with tattoos. I recognized him immediately and even exchanged a nod of greeting. His flat face was like the front of a Mac truck.

“You two thought you were so smart,” Winny sneered. “Waltz out of my house with a million dollars. And what do I get in return? Mane hair that isn't even from a Thoroughbred. That hair is coarse with a slight wave.” He pointed to where it lay partially scattered over the coffee table. “A Thoroughbred's mane is almost as fine as human hair and always straight. And on top of that, you fools clipped it. There aren't any follicles here. You can't get DNA out of hair; you need the follicle.” He said, “I'll take that tape now.” Expressionless, LL handed Winny the audiotape. “Take them out and bury them with Mistral.”

“Come on,” Klingman ordered, waving his gun.

I stood up, praying my jellied legs would carry me. LL remained seated.

“Get moving!” Stevie ordered, pointing his gun at LL.

“You've forgotten a couple of things,” LL said as he rose. His face was hard and his eyes narrowed. “You still don't have Mistral's hair or our tape of the telephone call.”

“You don't have any hair,” Winny retorted. “And the tape incriminates Judge Tony here, not me.”

“Okay, bury us with Mistral, but tomorrow the cops will be all over this place, asking a lot of questions. For starters they'll be in touch with The Jockey Club. Then they'll investigate whether Mac O'Farrell ever boarded a flight for Ireland. Plus they'll want to know why Tony called you yesterday, arranged to meet you, and he and his trusty bailiff have never been seen or heard from since.”

Winny motioned his Posse to hold up and carefully appraised LL and me. “Take the amateur sleuths out to the vacant barn. I'll be right there.”

Surrounding us, their guns hidden but at the ready, the Posse escorted us toward the collection of stables and barns in back of the main house. Our footsteps crunched on the dusty gravel. Barn swallows dove and swooped. I wondered why the police weren't there. We'd planned that something like this might happen, but figured that with Jen monitoring, we could summon the police in time. *Maybe my mike wasn't working? Maybe Jen hadn't heard a thing?* I glanced nervously at LL. His quick look back was not reassuring.

LL said, "You're creating one gigantic piece of shit that's gonna rain down on you very soon. I was a lieutenant in the State Police, and he's a judge. Let us go, and we might be able to help you."

"Keep moving," the short, tattooed guy said.

"Winny gets the money, and you guys do the time. Sounds fair to me."

"Shut up," tattoo man commanded.

I wished LL would shut up too, but he kept mouthing off. "Which barn is it? The red one or the white?"

The short guy with tattoos struck LL between the shoulder blades, shoving him forward. For a second I thought LL was going to turn on him. Instead, he said, "White for purity. No, that doesn't fit. Red for the devil. Now that's more like it."

They'd apparently given up trying to keep LL quiet and kept herding us forward. It was clear that we were headed for an exquisitely reconstructed miniature barn with a cupola, painted red.

"A little red barn. How quaint," LL said.

Tattoo man was becoming ugly. "One more word out of you, and I'll drop you right here."

LL turned around to face him. "Go ahead. Shoot me in front of the whole fucking world. That would be real smart."

"Shut the fuck up!"

Klingman swung open the barn door and snapped on the switch. Bright lighting illuminated an immaculate barn, polished wood floor, and eight vacant stables on each side of the central corridor. Once inside, Tattoo Man became more physical, pushing us into the first stall. The four of them, Tattoo Man, Klingman, Stevie, and the other guy in riding britches all trained their weapons on us.

"Did you fellows know it's the death penalty if you kill a law enforcement officer or a judge? Yep, that's the law, the death penalty. Not so bad now, lethal injection. Used to be by hanging." LL tugged at an imaginary noose around his neck. "Hasn't been anyone killed at the New Hampshire State Prison for, I don't know, sixty, seventy years."

Tattoo Man interrupted LL's monologue. "I don't have to wait for no Winny to take you out of play."

"You know, the executioner at the prison, he must be like the Maytag repairman. Day after day with nothing to do. You fellas could really give him a hard-on."

Winny noisily swung the barn door open. He carried a cell phone. "What's your home phone number, Judge Tony?"

I gave it to him. "But no one's home right now."

"Your wife will be checking the messages, especially when you don't return with a million dollars." Winny dialed the number. While he waited for the answering machine and message, he asked, "By the way, how were you planning to divide it? Fifty-fifty?"

"Naw," LL answered, "Since it was all his idea, the judge insisted that he get two-thirds."

Winnie flashed me an approving smile. Our message must have ended for he began to talk into the telephone. His voice could have flash frozen a mastodon. “Mrs. Paris. I have no doubt that you know who this is, and I apologize about the unpleasant circumstances, but it is your husband and his bailiff who have created the problem. I’m here with Judge Tony now, and if you want to see him alive again, you will—” Winnie glanced at his watch “—by ten this evening bring me all of Mistral’s remaining mane hairs, an audiotape of your husband’s telephone call to me, and copies of all the research he claims to have done. Do not delay. Do not inform the police. The consequences will be very unpleasant. Now, here is your husband.” Winnie handed me his cell phone.

Whether Jen was out of range and unable to hear what Winnie said over my wire, I wasn’t certain. But I definitely didn’t want her to come anywhere near Winnie and his Posse. “Honey, don’t do what he says. Stay away, please!”

Winnie grabbed the phone away from me, wincing with rage. He tipped his head in the direction of Tattoo Man, who was beside me. He tucked his gun into his jeans and disappeared behind me. Winnie pushed redial and again waited for our message to end. “Mrs. Paris, do you know how a member of the Posse breaks a horse’s leg? With a four foot crowbar. It sounds like this.” Winnie pointed the phone in my direction.

Before I could pivot to see what was coming, the crowbar hit my shin. The pain shot to my head like an exploding rocket. A shrieking scream gurgled into moans as I hit the floor. Everything went blurry. My right leg burned with excruciating pain. The cool wooden floor pressed against my cheek and head.

I heard LL say, “You fucking tattooed midget!”

Winnie said, “Do you know what happens to horses with broken legs. They’re put down.”

Someone pressed the phone against my mouth. “Tell her how you feel now, Judge Tony.”

I couldn’t even think.

“Tell her how you feel!” Winny said.

I groaned from the pain.

“Tell her!”

“Stay away,” I moaned.

Winny pulled the phone away and straightened up. I heard LL scream. The blow smashed my other leg. Waves of pain boiled through my whole body. Red swam in front of my eyes, and I went in and out of consciousness.

* * *

The crash sounded like a bomb exploding. Wood snapped and cracked from the impact. There was screaming and hollering. It happened behind me and I was in no condition or position to witness it. Something had burst through the side of the barn. A section of roof creaked, groaned, and then noisily collapsed. I heard a couple of shots, followed by LL yelling, “Drop it!”

Painfully, I lifted and turned my head. The barn was full of dust, but in the middle of it was a Toyota Rav4, its windshield cracked and busted barn boards still trembling around it. Perched in the driver’s seat, holding an automatic out the window, was none other than my wife, Jennifer Paris. Winny and his Posse were lined up against the side of the stall, their hands in the air. LL, his back to me, stood in front of them.

Jen turned off the engine. The barn went silent. LL took a step toward the five men. I heard a shot, and Tattoo Man dropped to the ground, holding his knee and screaming in agony.

“Oops,” LL said.

Saturday

I had a vague memory of someone loading me into an ambulance, but after that everything was gone. When I came to I was in bed in a dimly lit room. It was night and Jen was sitting next to me. When I opened my eyes, her cool palm stroked my forehead. There was no pain. In fact I felt groggily euphoric. “Am I in the hospital?”

“Yes, honey. Portsmouth Hospital. You’re going to be fine.”

I had to ask what day it was and Jen told me Saturday.

“Morning or night?” I asked, observing the dark window.

“It’s eight o’clock at night. They operated this morning.”

My eyes were slowly gaining focus and my brain was beginning to collect itself. LL watched TV from a chair at the foot of my bed.

“Hey, sleeping beauty.”

I started to shift toward Jen, but couldn’t. Heavy casts encased both my legs. A pulley and weight lifted my right leg, which had a cast reaching mid-thigh.

It all went black again, and then it was daylight. My airy room was filled with flowers and light. Jen was still stationed beside my bed. A doctor stood next to me. I had a vague recollection of seeing him before as part of a blurry dream.

He had been talking to Jen, but seeing me come awake, he turned to me. He introduced himself as my surgeon, told me it was Sunday morning, and asked how I felt.

My elevated leg ached and throbbed. “Can you cut this leg off?” I asked.

Tapping his fingers on my raised cast, he said, “It hurts?”

“Yeah,” I muttered.

He stepped around Jen and adjusted one of the bottles that was dripping into my arm. “Your right leg was shattered,” he said. “Probably because it was the leg he hit while you were

on the floor. We had to put in a plate and some screws in order to stabilize it. They're not permanent. Once it's fully healed and back stronger than ever, we'll take them out. In the meantime, you'll be mystifying a lot of metal detectors."

Jen asked, "Do you have any idea when you'll be releasing him?"

"Probably Tuesday or Wednesday. I want to observe him for at least a couple more days. And physical rehab will need to teach him how to operate a wheelchair and care for himself."

After the doctor left, Jen stroked my forehead. The pain in my leg receded measurably with each breath. I glanced gratefully at the IV bag hanging above me.

"I love you," I remember saying before I drifted off again.

I woke up around noon and for the first time felt some pangs of hunger. Jen was right there. So was some of my family. I greeted them groggily. When Sal and Barbara made their way to the forefront, moisture welled up in my eyes. When they started crying, tears formed and rolled down my cheeks.

"I am so sorry," I said. "I never knew that hank of hair would put Brittany in danger like that. If I had known..."

Sal patted my shoulder while Barbara held my hand, stroking my arm. "We know, we know," Sal said. "You just take care of yourself. You're a great godfather, Tony. The best."

After a few more minutes, my family meandered out. In their wake I noticed LL occupying the chair at the foot of my bed, watching some hunting show.

"Hello," I said.

Without taking his eyes off the television, he raised his hand and waved hello.

Continuing to stroke my forehead, Jen began to fill me in on what had happened. She'd called the police as soon as Winny admitted the breeding scheme. "The way he raved over Mistral's hair made me nervous."

Women's intuition, I thought.

"But there was a big fire in Portsmouth that delayed their arrival."

"So they claim," chimed in LL.

"You crashed your car into the barn?" I asked, trying to focus on the moments after I had been hit.

"When you left the main house, you started to fade out, but I did hear LL talking about the white and the red barn, so I climbed into the front seat and began driving toward the barns. I was a hundred yards from the red barn when he broke your leg..." Jen choked up and pent-up tears of worry ran down her face.

I grabbed her hand and kissed it. "Don't cry, you probably saved our lives."

LL had swung his chair around. "You bet your sweet ass she did. Just like Annie Oakley." Smiling at the allusion, Jen pulled her hand away to wipe her tears "Came flying into the barn with all barrels blazing."

"Come on," she corrected. "I just shot a couple of times into the air."

"Yeah, but they didn't know that!"

"You fired a shot, didn't you?" I asked to LL. "Did you shoot that short guy with the tattoos?"

"Accidentally," he answered, a thin grin creasing his face. "In the kneecap. It was one of their revolvers. Damn thing had a hair trigger. Wish I had known."

Jen eyed him skeptically but didn't say a word.

“How did you drive your car through a barn?” I asked, still dazed by everything that had happened.

“Fast! I was worried sick I might run over you or LL, but I assumed they were probably keeping you at one end of the barn or the other, so I crashed right through the middle.”

“Scared the bejesus out of them. I grabbed Klingman’s gun, and it was over.”

“What happened to Winny and the rest of them?” I asked.

“The police arrived in the nick of time...ten minutes later,” LL added sarcastically.

“They arrested the whole lot. Every one of them is behind bars, charged with murder. The wire worked perfect, and with all the evidence the police have, even they couldn’t fuck up this case.”

“I called Lee McAllister’s wife yesterday, to let her know,” Jen went on.

“What happened to Lee and that Irish trainer?” I asked.

LL answered, “So far we don’t know. None of Bartholow’s Posse has rolled over yet, but it’s only a matter of time before one of them turns State’s evidence. They did find McAllister’s car in an outbuilding, but no sign of him.”

“Anyhow,” Jen said, “Lee’s wife wanted me to thank you and hopes that you’ll get well soon.”

“You’re the one she should be thanking,” LL said, resting his paw on her shoulder.

“I’ll second that,” I said.

Jen blushed, and we held each other’s eyes, saying nothing. Jen and I started to tear up. I thought I saw a watery sheen in LL’s eyes too.

Embarrassed he pulled back. “Aw, come on, you two.”

Monday

Jen arrived at Portsmouth Hospital right after the nurse's aide had cleared away breakfast. She brought me the first section of the Sunday Coastal Courier. A picture on the front page showed cars and horse trailers choking the drives and parking areas of Bartholow Farms as owners and breeders rushed to rescue their animals. The accompanying article interviewed some of them on the ramifications of Bartholow's fraud. One leading breeder ventured that Winny had set the horse breeding industry back to the dark ages, before blood-typing had cleaned up most of its unscrupulous practices. "People have always been skittish about buying a horse, and this will only confirm their worst fears."

Another article was a recap of the rise and fall of Bartholow Farms. A picture of Winny in his more halcyon days, surrounded by glitterati at some Thoroughbred racing gala in New York. Behind him, but still close, I could make out Stevie Holmes.

LL came by late that afternoon. Even though it was overcast and muggy, he was wearing his Winston Cup jacket. I couldn't fathom why until with a mischievous grin plastered on his face, he ambled up the side of the bed opposite Jen. "I thought you might like one of these," he whispered. From his jacket pocket he pulled three nip bottles of White Label.

I looked at the IV hooked up to my left arm and said, "I'd better not."

"Jen?" he offered.

Chuckling at his antics, she declined, which I knew she would.

"Okay then, I'll drink 'em." He took some chipped ice from the plastic container next to my bed, a small Dixie cup, and poured himself a scotch.

"You don't even like scotch," I said.

"I know, but if you're not going to drink it...." He looked like the boy who bought his favorite CD to the party and no one else wanted to listen to it.

“I’ll have one,” I relented.

“Oh what the hell, me, too,” Jen said.

Happily LL dipped two more Dixie cups into the plastic container of chipped ice, emptied the last two scotch nips, and handed them to Jen and me.

“To us,” he toasted, and we touched our three cups over my chest.

Wednesday

The doctor released me Wednesday before lunch. Around five, my entire family, mother, brothers, sisters, and all my nieces and nephews except Sal and Barbara and their kids—they were visiting Brittany, came over, laden with casseroles and marinara sauce. LL showed up looking for some good Canadian whiskey— “Rosemary has to work tonight.”

I was seated in my wheelchair, my right leg elevated, in the middle of the family room. Despite feeling exhausted, I was as happy as I'd ever been. I heard a few people, “Shushing,” and the room went totally silent. I looked around to see why. Someone was clumping up the wheelchair ramp in the breezeway.

Coming into view from around the kitchen counter was Brittany, walking unassisted with a set of neon pink forearm crutches. Trailing behind, huge grins lighting their faces, were Sal and Barbara.

“Surprise,” Sal yelled.

“Hi, Uncle Tony,” Brittany said with no hesitation or stutter.

“Brittany! How are you?”

“I'm good, Uncle Tony. Look at me walk.” She made her way over to me.

“I can't tell you how happy that makes me, kiddo. You're a champ.”

Reaching me, Brittany leaned against my wheelchair. Her halo still prevented kissing or hugging so we touched our fingers to our own lips and then to each other's. There was joyous murmur from everyone in the room. “Daddy told me that mean Mr. Bartholow broke your legs.”

“He did, but I'll be fine, and he's going to jail for what he did to you and me.”

“Are you going to send him?”

“No, honey, I'm not. Some other judge.”

While Jen talked to Brittany, Sal reported that the psychologist hadn't found any cognitive loss, and that the physical rehab staff we're amazed at her progress. "The doctor says it's a lot like a broken bone in a kid, the recuperative power of young cells is amazing. He thinks her spinal cord was badly bruised in the fall, but as the swelling has continued to go down, it appears to be healing. He's not promising, but he's hoping she'll regain almost all of her strength and feeling."

"God, that's exactly like a miracle."

"It is one," Barbara said.

Sal said, "Do you remember Pop talking about don't ever hurt a Genovese fisherman's family?"

"Yeah," I answered, unsure where he was going.

"I've been thinking about that the last few days. I'm real proud of you baby brother."

He leaned down, holding my head with both his hands, and kissed my left cheek and then my right.

I started to cry.

* * *

When the last person left it was past nine, and we were both exhausted. While Jen tidied up, I got ready for bed. I managed to extricate myself from the wheelchair and toppled onto the mattress. Eventually I got myself undressed and oriented properly. The covers were stuck under my casts, not that I cared. Jen wheeled in and took one look at the state of our bed.

Maneuvering around in her wheelchair, she arranged the covers, fussing over me like a nurse.

"Are you sure you'll be comfortable?"

"Are you kidding? My own bed. No janitor waking me at five-thirty in the morning."

“I’ll be right along. Don’t go to sleep without me.”

“You’d better hurry,” I warned.

I started to shift slightly but couldn’t. The casts, more like cement shoes, immobilized my legs. Without sitting up and physically rearranging them, I couldn’t roll over or change position. But it really didn’t matter; being home in my own bed there was nothing that was going to keep me from a deep sound sleep. I closed my eyes.

It didn’t last long. Jen’s hand on my chest aroused me from the drowsy prelude to slumber. She rained tender kisses over my cheeks until she found my lips.

I knew she was relieved and glad to have me home. I was, too.

Caressing my chest, Jen murmured, “I love you.”

Half awake, I put an arm under her and drew her closer. Like my own bed, she felt familiar, reassuring, restful. I closed my eyes, preparing to drift back into Morpheus’ bosom.

Jen swung her palm across my waist, her fingers brushing my shorts. Her lips slid down my neck and back up again. I lay there, letting her caresses carry me off to sleep. Her hand continued to float over my chest and stomach. “Ummm,” I uttered.

Jen lifted herself up high enough to kiss me on the mouth. It was a long kiss, her tongue snaking between my lips. Really more than I wanted right then. “Jen,” I said.

Her lips moved across my cheek and she nuzzled my ear, her hand reaching inside my undershorts.

“Honey, let’s get some rest,” I said.

Into my ear she whispered those magic words, pregnant with optimism and hope, “Tony, it’s blue.”