



Chapters 1-3

"Magical Thinking: The conviction of the individual that his or her thoughts, words, and actions, may in some manner cause or prevent outcomes in a way that defies the normal laws of cause and effect."

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"There are sorcerers among us." Larry Dossey, MD, from:

Be Careful of What You Pray for, you just might get it

Harper Collins Publishers

For Leslie, and for everybody else who has been so devastated by tardive dyskinesia that they ended their lives because of it.

Prologue

Beth McDonald was an imaginative child. And willful, too. Tell her she couldn't do something and she would, just to test her own mettle.

Like the time one hot summer day when she was ten and her uncle Jason took her to the warehouse in the Flats along the Cuyahoga River that he kept for his natural foods business. A complete little tomboy- all skinned knees, grubby sneakers and muddy soccer shorts, her pigtails braided so tight they seemed to pull her face back with them- she'd leapt into the back of his pickup truck where he'd let her ride in spite of that being against the law in Ohio and wedged herself tight into the corner munching on a big bag of Doritos so she could grin and wave up at startled truckers howling by in massive semis and feel the air funnels of their passage flap her tee shirt and pig tails, then sail along the east shoreway hoping they'd catch the fleeting shadow of a plane taking off from Burke Lakefront airport and follow it down the highway like the moon eclipsed by the earth, then lean way, way back and just listen to the steady hum of uncle Jason's Diesel Toyota tires on the asphalt and pretend she'd hitched a ride on a freight train the way her teacher said the homeless did during the Great Depression and she knew she had to keep her head loooooooow, as low as it would go to be sure it wasn't lopped off by a passing bridge, but she knew she had to keep a wary eye out as well, for the company police who were more likely than not to simply throw any hobo they caught riding the rails right off of the moving train and be ready to fight for her life if one came clamoring up the box car she was riding atop, and when uncle Jason made that sharp turn at dead man's curve and it rattled her bony little body around in the back of that truck with the greasy old milk crate full of engine valves and the catamaran off his boat like a wild ride on a centrifuge, well that was just what any new NASA recruit would have to endure training for that world-saving trip to rein in the comet hurling towards our planet and send it on off on a new trajectory, and she knew she'd better just get used to it if she was ever going to make it as space jockey in the Astronaut Corps, so she relished every bone-jarring lurch and thump until the crunch of gravel and a hard right turn told her they were there and she could come out from under cover 'cause she'd made it through the training exercise without hitting her PANIC button.

"You all right back there?!"

Grimy and grinning, with styrofoam packing crate peanuts stuck behind her ears, Beth McDonald sat up and squinted underneath the faded Gore/Leiberman 2000 bumper sticker to uncle Jason in the cab. "Good to go back here!" She straddled the side panel and dropped to the ground with a "plunk!" as he cut off the engine and stepped out onto the gravel.

"Ugh! You're a mess!" He chuckled and brushed the packing crate peanuts from her hair. Then a horrible sudden noise had them both jerking back reflexively and uncle Jason shielded her with his body. "What the hell!?" It was like a clap of thunder! Again! WWWOOOOFFF!

A huge black dog had lunged out from behind a plywood barrier on the other side of a chain link fence separating her uncle's portion of the lot from a used motorcycle parts business. A horror movie apparition, it stood on its hind legs and the force of its presence sent waves rippling up and down the twenty meters of cold steel. It barked like a cannon and Beth went slack-jawed in awe.

"Wow!"

"Damn, they should have WARNED us they were getting that thing!" Uncle Jason muttered something about those guys next door that she wasn't meant to hear and roughly moved her away from the fence. "Stay away from him! Get back in the truck," he told her. "Up front, in the cab! And keep the door locked! I'll be out in a minute." He stomped over to the door, fiddled with the alarm and went inside while the hound raged on.

Immediately, Beth turned and gaped back at it. A big black, tailless Doberman with stiletto sharp ear stumps and the jaw of a T-Rex, it caught her eye and lunged again.

But Beth's adrenaline jolt had already subsided and a prickly hot flush came over her. She was safe where she sat. But she knew she'd be safe back outside, too. That fence was solid and that dog wasn't going anywhere. She just HAD to get a good look at him. And she had a plan for dealing with him.

Bag in hand, she popped open the door to the cab, closed it softly and stood about ten meters away from him munching Doritos and staring him down. He roared, but she stood her ground. He ran in circles and threw himself against the fence again, getting catapulted off of it when it sprang back on him. He whirled like a dervish and his rage seemed about to reach critical mass with his next fruitless lunge at the fence.

Beth flipped him a Dorito, right up over the fence. He took that as a provocation and leapt again, but then sniffed and gobbled it down. Beth flipped him another. And another. He smacked his tongue and wagged the little stub of his tail, but he started his war dance right back up.

Then uncle Jason reappeared. "Beth, cut it OUT!" He grabbed her by the elbow and hauled her back into the cab of his truck. She sat mute, suppressing a grin while he balled her out. "Don't DO that! Did you see the TEETH on that brute!? If he'd gotten out of there, he would have torn you in two!" He gestured back at the beast. "Dogs like that aren't PETS! You CAN'T just PLAY with them!" He took the Dorito bag from her lap, crumbled it and stuffed it in the trash bag between the seats. "Jeeze, that was dumb!"

Beth did her best to look contrite.

"Promise me you won't do that again!"

"I promise," she murmured, with her fingers crossed.

"All right then," her uncle sighed, starting the engine and pulling out of the lot. He had to get three crates of soy mix to a store in Shaker Heights before it closed, and he was in a hurry.

Uncle Jason wasn't angry for long, and when they started talking again Beth told him how she thought she was ready for a 10K run, but her coach at St. Ann's wanted girls under twelve to stick to the 5K instead and she thought that was SO lame, and that got him chuckling. He and his wife were watching Beth while her Mom, a psychologist, was off at conferences in Europe and her Dad, an attorney, was defending tax evaders who were on trial in Chicago. Back on the shoreway, Beth started in on when was he going to teach her to drive the truck? Well, if he wasn't going to risk letting her drive yet, could she at least ride along with him again when he came down here to the warehouse? Like, the ride along the lake was... well AWESOME, but all she was really doing was making up excuses to come visit that junk yard dog again. Beth McDonald had made up her mind that she was going to make that dog her friend by summer's end.

One time a week later he took her along and asked her to help him carry some crates inside. That dog did his war dance again and uncle Jason hustled her in, slamming the door hard behind him. But then he was distracted by a call and she snuck out with a Kit Kat bar she'd brought for the occasion. She tossed in two pieces of it before she had to scoot back in, and when they left he was raging again, but his howl wasn't so quite so bloodcurdling.

The very next day she begged to go along with uncle Jason when he made a run down there to get a crate of vitamins for a store in Lakewood. That time, she got to face off with her dog friend just a few feet from the fence till he howled himself hoarse. Then she tossed him bits of a hot dog she'd filched from aunt Gloria's fridge, and he'd just scarfed down the last morsel when an ugly, bearded man with tattoos came out and hollered at them both.

The man menaced him with a two-by-four and that big dog cringed and slinked out of sight. Beth felt bad for him and glared at the tattooed man. Her lip quivered, she locked her jaw and stared at him until he cringed like the dog and turned away in shame.

Something about that encounter gave Beth McDonald the spookiest feeling that she possessed some secret weapon that made up for her small size and her young age, but she forced it out of her conscious mind because even thinking about it might cause her to lose it.

One more time, just before school was to start, she accompanied uncle Jason to the warehouse. The

dog again made a stand. Beth projected all her willpower to make him settle down, but he was still howling when her uncle ushered her in the door. She slipped out a few minutes later with a fish cake she'd been nibbling on during the ride. He only pawed the fence and growled this time. Beth stepped closer, so close she could have touched his nose through the fence if she dared. She was frightened, but only of being caught there by her uncle or the tattooed man. She stepped closer and deftly flicked a morsel of fish cake through the fence without touching it. He snapped it out of the air without moving his paws. "Hey, good catch!" Another, and another, and with the last bit of it, Beth dared to put her little fingers right up to the fence and she had that vicious dog eating right out of her hand...

"You SON OF A BITCH!!" It was the tattooed man! He'd appeared without warning. "What the HELL kind of guard dog ARE you!?" SMACK! He hit her dog friend upside the head with that two-by-four! It tumbled and cried out in pain. "You worthless bag of garbage!" THUD!! A kick to his side and he squealed and tried to hobble out of the way... "Don't you EVER let anyone touch that fence!!!" The dog howled, Beth shrieked and her uncle burst out of the door.

"Beth!"

"Mister, get your little BRAT away from my fence, or I'll..."

"Hey! Don't you call my niece names!" He grabbed Beth, but she held tight to the fence.

"Stop it, you! Stop!" Beth kicked the fence. All she could hear was the echo of her own screams.

"Stop it! STOP IT!!!"

But her cries only provoked the man to kick the dog harder. "Lousy mutt! I paid four hundred dollars for NOTHING!!!" Cringing and whimpering under the blows, the big black Doberman curled up and tried to shield its head with his paws...

"...I hate you! I HATE you!!!" For an instant she locked the man in her gaze and something went SNAP! in her head... "I hope you DIE!!!" Other men from the tattooed man's side of the warehouse shouted coarsely, but made no attempt to stop him from punishing his dog.

"For God's sake Beth! Come ON!!!" Her uncle dislodged her and dragged her screaming back into the warehouse. "Mister," he hollered over Beth's cries, "if you don't stop abusing that dog, I'm calling the cops!"

"Fuck you!" A cough, then more kicks, more squeals...

"Die, you, die, die!!!" Beth screamed and cursed till her uncle slammed the door between her and the horror.

"Calm DOWN! He WON'T get away with that!" He snapped the lock and yanked out the key to keep her in, then went to his office to call the police. Beth raged and cried and pounded on the door and wished that man dead.

Then it was quiet out there. A thunderstorm rumbled their way. Rain plinked on the windows. In another minute there were sirens, and shouting again. Uncle Jason stayed on the phone to the cops while Beth pouted, then went out to see and he didn't lock her in. She followed him out into the storm. But it wasn't the police. It was an emergency medical vehicle, with red and blue lights flashing in the rain. Those men who watched the beating emerged from their side of the warehouse, followed by two EMS men bearing a stretcher. On it was the tattooed man, with an oxygen mask stuck over his face. "He's not going to make it," said one of his associates following them to their van. The dog was nowhere in sight. Beth gaped, speechless, as they drove the dying man away.

"Beth, honey, it's got nothing to do with what you said," her uncle assured her. His voice was shaky and his grip on her arm was clammy and trembling. "He just had... had an unhealthy lifestyle and it finally got to him, that's all... You can't wish a person dead and really make it happen. You simply CAN'T do that!"

Chapter One

Haphazardly dropping her blouse and skirt on her bed, 17 year old Beth McDonald hurried to change into her running gear. The rest of team would be off in five minutes, with or without her. The early October day bore the heat of one in midsummer and the shade of three old oaks around her dorm building did little to dispel it. Her head swam with caffeine, hormones and the unsettling electricity of a gathering storm. She stuffed her feet into her running shoes and cursed when she realized she couldn't find a rubber band to put the mess that was her hair that afternoon into a ponytail. Lean, statuesque, with ivory skin and jet black hair, Beth was a beautiful young woman. Muscular legs and square shoulders spoke of years of athletic training, but you'd have to be blind to mistake her for a man. Beth got a lot of attention from men and more than a little from women, as well. So far as she was concerned, she could do without the former. An adequate, if somewhat lackadaisical student at an exclusive Catholic girls' school that was only two kilometers from the house in Cleveland Heights where she grew up, Beth had opted in her freshman year to board rather than walk or bike to and from school and her parents hadn't objected, though it was costing them an extra six thousand dollars a year and Beth's entire work history to date wouldn't take more than a line or two on an index card. She lived to run, and was damned good at it- she'd held girls' state record for the 10K for more than a year. Indeed, she was so good that three universities had already offered her athletic scholarships.

Her cell phone jangled with the opening of Paramore's *Let the Flames Begin*. Beth yanked the lace tight on her right shoe, leaving the other untied and flipped the phone open. "Hello?" She could guess who it was.

"Beth, are you coming?" Haleh's voice was faint, and high-pitched with worry.

"Yes sweetheart, I'm coming! You worry so much!" Beth cradled the phone on her shoulder while she tied the other shoe. "I gotta' run the whole course with the team, but I'll lose them and loop down to our place at the end. Gimme' an hour, OK?"

"I'll meet you on the way there. With the kind of juice you like."

"You're too sweet."

"I miss you."

"I miss you, too." Beth blew a quiet kiss into the phone and snapped it shut, but not before whispering to Haleh "I love you." It'd been a whole week since they'd been together and Beth ached for the girl's touch. She and Haleh had found a tiny, forgotten brick maintenance shed off the path in a densely wooded park near her school where they could climb up on the roof and be out of view of all, even to people running or rollerblading just a few meters away. Haleh would bring a quilt in the basket on her bike and they'd spread that out on the rough tar paper and wooden roof and be intimate there. After a run, Beth would be charged with a passion that astonished and amused Haleh and more than once her cries of ecstasy had nearly given them away to passersby.

Beth heard her teammates' feet pounding softly down the driveway to the school's Fairmount Boulevard gate. No time to stretch or warm up. She loped out after them and caught up easily. Always the pace setter, Beth took the lead with fourteen girls following her up the shady suburban boulevard. Their chatter was mostly of boys who were cute, of teachers who gave too much homework, of vapid films they wanted to see that weekend and all of that was more reason for Beth to stay out ahead.

She heard steps closing in behind her. It was Colleen, a quiet red haired girl who was serious like herself. She held a small flask of energy drink. "I'm going to toss this, unless you want the rest of it," she told Beth.

"Sure. Thanks!" Before she could weigh the consequences, Beth chugged it, coughed and pitched it in a curbside trash can. The caffeine worked its way to her heart and she broke out in a cold sweat. "Hey," she told Colleen, "I'm gonna' do some wind sprints. See you up ahead!" Beth charged out ahead of the pack with seemingly boundless energy.

“Take it EASY, McDonald,!” somebody yelled, but Beth wouldn't hear it. The breeze fluttering her little white running shorts against her thighs was like foreplay for her date with Haleh and Beth McDonald felt more naked than she'd ever felt before wearing them. With one part of her brain obsessed with moving her legs at full throttle, another part of it generated random word chatter, as it often did at times such as this. It locked onto the Hare Krishna chant she'd heard in a video that her Comparative Religion teacher had played for them the previous week. “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare...”

A small boy of three or so sat on a tricycle in a driveway up ahead, staring gape-jawed at the apparition charging his way...

“...Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna...” Beth's chanting was silent- in her head only- she was positive of that. She'd always been embarrassed by public professions of religion...

“...Hare Rama...” She glanced down to smile at the boy and say hi...

“Rama Rama,” he declared, with a big grin. “Rama Rama!”

Damn!! It happened again! Beth broke stride and fought not to gape back, horrified at the boy. Somebody had read her mind and spoken the very words she'd been thinking! It had occurred too many times, in too many peculiar circumstances for it to be coincidence! And it was happening more and more all the time. Was this how a person went insane? Now she was barely walking, trembling and saying the rare prayer that she not turn and frighten the innocent boy with a horrified face.

Colleen ran up behind her and slapped her on the back. “OK, Beth?”

Beth managed a lie: “Sure, just a cramp.” The rest of the team flew by on either side of them.

“Be careful, OK?” Colleen ran off ahead.

“Thanks, Col,” Beth grunted. “I'll catch up.” Her teammates flew gracefully up the street, ponytails bouncing.

Beth first became aware that she could broadcast her thoughts around age 11 or twelve. Every time it happened she'd tell herself it was just some fluke of electro magnetics that some day Science would explain. A few times she was even able to chuckle at the bewilderment of strangers who found themselves mouthing words that meant nothing to them, but it had been occurring at an ever greater frequency and this was the second time that year it had involved a young child. The previous incident had been nothing short of nightmarish. Beth was on the #32 bus in Beachwood, listening to a mother scolding her son for no good reason, and was quietly imagining what she'd like to say to the lady when suddenly the boy blurted out the precise, exotic vulgarity Beth had been thinking. The woman flew into a rage and struck him repeatedly, creating a melee on the bus when witnesses intervened to stop her. Beth had fled the scene in horror and did herculean mental gymnastics to shove the whole incident out of her conscious mind. That worked, till the boy on the tricycle brought it all to the surface again. One common thread behind these incidents was they they always seemed to happen when she was in particularly high spirits. Now would she have to go through life trying to be depressed just so she didn't hurt anybody with her thoughts? That struck her as so ridiculous she once again shoved the whole affair deep into a black box in her brain, squeezed her eyes shut so hard it hurt and slammed her fist into her hand to lock it all in. Then charging up the street, she rejoined the team.

“You gotta' go easy on that caffeine, Beth!” Colleen looked over and winked.

“Hell, you gave it to me!” Beth slapped her playfully on the butt.

“Look at the lezzies,” quipped a sophomore girl behind them.

Beth turned and gave her the finger, but with a wry smile.

Up the low incline that was Fairmount Boulevard, with its vast perfect lawns and seven figure homes the girls of the Glenmont cross country team ran. Again, Beth ran out ahead, setting the pace, her snarled hair whipping in the humid breeze, the sweat on her brow scarcely cooling her. Behind them, sixteen kilometers away over downtown Cleveland, thunder rumbled. A pack of earnest cyclists in black spandex shorts and dayglow jerseys on expensive racing bikes whooshed by quietly, a few of them grinning at the pretty young runners two meters away. Some of the girls waved to their comrades in sweat. Across the street, a goateed young man in a VW bug honked and waved, but nobody seemed to know him. No matter. There was strength and safety in numbers. A few girls started singing Janis Joplin's *Mercedes Benz*. “Oh

Lord, won't you buy me a Mer-cedes Benz, my friends all drive Porches, I must make amends!"

At South Belvoir Road, Beth turned and the pack followed. Now the incline of the road was downhill and Beth felt the impact of each step acutely in her knees. But the pain of that was minor and the excitement in her chest, the sheer exhilaration of charging down that road nearly as fast as any human being could possibly run was more than enough to compensate. Jaws dropped at the sight of them as they charged through the heart of John Carroll University. Frat boys whistled and cheered. "You go, girls!" hollered a woman, choking on her cigarette.

Haleh wasn't a runner, or much of an athlete at all, although Beth was happy that she was riding her bike a lot and seemingly growing fitter. Beth's girlfriend would be loathe to be seen wearing anything like Beth's skimpy running gear. Nice Iranian girls didn't dress like.

She roomed with her older sister Mari in a tiny attic apartment on the poorer end of Cleveland Heights, north of the strip of bars, coffee shops and overpriced boutiques along Coventry road that some still considered chic'. Both were students at Case Western Reserve University, Mari an engineering major and Haleh a freshman who planned to major in Languages. She was already fluent in English and semi fluent in Russian and French. Their family had spent a small fortune sending them to America for their education and though they were not devout Muslims, a male cousin who was an intern at the Cleveland Clinic was always nosing around and no doubt reporting back to their father in Tehran on any real or imagined transgressions of propriety. Haleh always wore baggy slacks and sweaters- even in the summer heat- as well as a scarf covering her hair, which had to be torture, but she did not cover her face. Undressing with Beth on that splintery roof in the woods had to be a terrifying thing to do, but there was simply no other place they could go to be intimate. Beth dreaded the approach of winter and was planning to come out to her mother in the hope she could start bringing Haleh around the old house where she grew up as her girlfriend, not just "a good friend," as was the charade the few times Beth had brought her over for dinner. They'd been together since April, when Beth discovered the MySpace page that Haleh had taken out, with references to the poet Sappho and a clip by the folk duet The Murmurs. Beth had almost laughed out loud when the nervous, overdressed, dark-eyed girl sitting in the coffee shop where they'd arranged to meet leaned over to poke her and say hi. Needless to say she was expecting something completely different, but her surprise was a pleasant one and in those six months they'd gone from awkward adolescent groping to experienced lovemaking that had not yet begun to lose its thrill.

Belvoir ended in a short, steep incline up to Cedar Road, but Beth surged ahead, up over the crest of it and slowed for a second to turn and look back, She was a good fifty meters ahead of anybody else. Her heart thundered and chest heaved. The air now was near 100 percent humidity and to the west lightning flashed. In seconds the dull rumble reached them. Beth's only hope was that the storm would be brief and she could wait it out with Haleh in a bus shelter. There was little shade on Cedar road and the heat from earlier in the day rose in visible waves. Beth was soaked, and left a trail of perspiration on the hot pavement behind her.

Ahead a massive red Mac truck loaded with concrete debris seemed to be stalled in the street. Beth caught the driver's leering eye and felt the sting of pure evil. Crossing the street would have been impossible in the heavy traffic, so she ran on. As soon as she got within ten meters of the huge truck, it rumbled to life and spat out a cloud of noxious exhaust. The smoke rolled over Beth and toward the remaining members of the team, who were just then coming over the crest of the hill. She cursed. "Bastard, you did that on purpose!" To runners and cyclists, that sort of assault was all too familiar. Drivers who hate do it just because they can. The truck rumbled away and Beth started imagining him getting in a crash...

...until she remembered that her thoughts could have unpredictable consequences. Innocent people could get hurt. She forced the notion out of her mind and slapped Colleen on the back to help her clear her lungs. Girls stood hunched over, gagging on the sidewalk, those diesel fumes were so bad on their overworked lungs. It forced the whole team to break stride. Half of them fell to the grassy lawn of the funeral home on the corner so they could get beneath the poison. Spitting, wheezing and rubbing their eyes, girls looked to Beth for strength. She forced a determined smile. "C'mon, let's get moving! We can't let that

stink bomb ruin our run!”

In a tight pack they proceeded west on Cedar Road, up another short, steep incline and past an elementary school that was letting out for the day. Dozens of kids cheered them and a few took off in hot pursuit, much to the consternation of their crossing guards. The truck driver's foul offering faded already in Beth's mind and in her mind's eye was only Haleh laying naked beneath her on the quilt, smiling shyly and thrusting her soft unshaved lap against hers, her long black hair free and spread out like the rays of the sun, her olive skin glistening in the faint afternoon sun filtering through the lush greenery all around them...

“Beth, look out!”

She opened her eyes just in time to dodge a temporary traffic sign that work crews had planted on the sidewalk. It would have taken her cheek off. “Thanks!” she called back to the girl who warned her. Adrenaline from the near miss hit her a second later. Her heart hammered nearly out of control. She turned for a second and saw her teammates tortured expressions. She had to slow down for their sake, if not for her heart's. She dropped back, letting them to overtake her. Most of them slowed but not one of them stopped.

The sun broke through momentarily as the storm moved closer. A hot blast of wind whipped them, stirring up dust and debris from the street. Beth thought much more of this and they'd have to revert to running boring laps around Glenmont's outdoor track. The pungent smell of hot oil and overcooked fast food burned her nostrils as they neared the corner of Taylor Road. A bus rumbled by and somebody hurled a hamburger wrapper at her from a back window. Was that a calculated insult from somebody who took her to be a vegetarian? Anything seemed possible after that Mac truck.

Ahead was the massive Cleveland Heights High School and mobs of kids milling around outside, talking trash, checking out each others' cars, putting on tough airs to maintain the rigid adolescent hierarchy of that institution. “Hey, let's get in a tight group now!” Beth herded her teammates together for safety's sake. Across a high fence was the school's own running track, where the girls track team was working out. One of them eyed Beth's team.

“Glenmont, we're gonna' whip your white asses!” That brought a huge chorus of cheers and cat calls from the mob hanging out on the corner.

“We're cross country,” shouted a girl running ahead of Beth, “not track!” The point was lost on the mob. More shouting and insults.

“Just keep going,” Beth told the girl. “Don't let them pull you into their bullshit.” Suddenly she felt the toll that the heat, the exertion and the foul air had taken on her. Haleh said she was bringing Beth's favorite juice- pomegranate/apple- and she felt she could down a gallon of it.

They turned onto Lee Road for the last leg of the run, back towards the safety of Glenmont's shady, walled-in campus. Haleh would be riding this way on her bike from Coventry Rd- probably on the sidewalk across the street- and if Beth saw her she'd be able to run over for a word with her, but she wanted to finish her run with the team, then rendezvous with her at their secret love nest. She scanned the street, but Haleh was nowhere to be seen.

The street rose again ahead of them in the steepest incline of the whole course. Gasping for air now, the Glenmont team made an all out effort to take that last incline without slowing. Beth fell behind the sweaty pack of girls, turning, looking back and straining her eyes for any sign of Haleh. There was a hot orange flash followed almost instantaneously by a deafening clap of thunder. Girls laughed and screamed. The ozone of it tickled Beth's sinuses. Now it was a mad rush to make it back to school before the storm hit. The first hot raindrops plunked down around her. Beth sprinted up ahead to catch up with Colleen. “I'm gonna' take a little wind sprint up to the park. Cover for me, willya”?

Colleen grinned and made a lewd gesture with her tongue and two fingers of her right hand, but all the other girls were up ahead and didn't see it. She knew Beth had a girlfriend. “Be careful!”

Beth gave her shoulder a playful little punch and ran straight up Lee Road when everybody else turned onto Fairmount. She felt light, energized again. Every nook and cranny on Glenmont's rough hewn stone wall shimmered and vibrated as she flew past it. She knew Haleh was close even if she couldn't yet see her through the haze. A white van squealed close to the curb, startling her. She charged on, not noticing

that it had stopped, then lurched into reverse, careening madly, backwards up the street. It came alongside her just as she caught sight of Haleh on her bike a hundred meters or so ahead. The driver, a heavyset young man with a shaved head and shades rolled down the passenger side window and leaned toward it as he backed up the street alongside her.

“Lil' lady, you are just about the cutest thing I ever seen in hotpants!”

Beth ignored him.

“I could get you a job modeling! I know people in New York and L.A.!”

Beth tried to force a yawn. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of her paying him any attention. She knew not to talk to creeps like him...

“Hey *look* Sweetie, I'm talking *big bucks!* Three thousand a week, just for starters! Lemme' just take your picture in them little short shorts and we can start makin' plans. You and me, sweetie, jus' you and ME...”

Now Haleh saw Beth and was waving! Another flash of lightning...

“C'mon Peaches, don't be so stuck-up! Just lemme' get your picture..”

. ...the clap of thunder was simultaneous with Beth thinking: “Fuck you, asshole!”

“*What did you say?!?*” He barked that so loud Beth had to look. In the hand that wasn't on the steering wheel he had a small, dark object. Was he going to try and take her picture with his cell phone?! He extended that arm her way...

BAM!!!

Beth's first impression was that her head had struck a glancing blow on another one of those portable street signs, struck it so hard that she was momentarily blinded. Funny, she hadn't seen one in her path. She ran on, feeling oddly disconnected from her body. Twenty, thirty more steps she took, staggering, feeling a sudden downpour of moisture on her arms and shoulders, then collapsed face-first onto the sidewalk with blood gushing from holes on either side of her temple. There was the squealing of tires and Haleh's screaming, and the last thing Beth McDonald was aware of was the sensation of a succession of heavy oak doors slamming shut around her till there was nothing but darkness and pain.

Beth groped for the alarm clock, and missed, sending it crashing to the floor. The shrill rattle gave her an awful, nails-on-a-chalkboard sensation and all she could do was curl up in an embryonic position while it rang and rang and rang on the bare wooden floor. Finally it rang itself out. A cold February draft needled its way underneath the insulation covering her kitchen window and her baseboard heater ticked from expansion when the furnace downstairs sent up an overdue ration of heat. Somewhere behind the heating pipes, a small rodent scurried.

That was the first time in a long time that Haleh had visited her in a dream. Beth felt between her legs. Moist and slippery. "Must have been a good one," she muttered. The good part of it faded quickly, leaving Beth with the dim memory of another one of those mind control dreams that always left her so unsettled. Was there really a time when she believed that she had powers of mind over matter? Her memory of life before she got shot was such a confusing jumble.

She considered scooping up the alarm clock and resetting it up for another half hour or forty five minutes of fitful sleep, but the gnawing pressure in her bladder wouldn't let her rest, so she tossed the blankets off, rose and made her way to the bathroom to piss and splash some water on her face. She didn't need to splash the water. The cold toilet seat was enough to wake her up.

Bathrobe and slippers on, she padded into the kitchen for coffee. Rocky lay quietly in his usual place beneath the kitchen shelves. His tail beat softly against her foot. "Just a few minutes, pal." Beth reached down to pet him. He was so patient waiting to go out, even when he'd been cooped up all night. He always had some Cleveland Plain Dealers set down for him in the hallway, but he rarely used them. The batch laying there dated back to December.

She reached for her answering machine and fumbled for the volume knob. It was her day to field calls to the hotline. A tinny robot voice told her: "Three calls, at three-O-two AM, four seventeen AM and Eight twenty two AM... Three calls, at three-O..." Beth hated the way the damn thing kept repeating itself. She knew there was a way to turn that feature off, but it was a new model and she hadn't completely figured it out yet. It would have been easier to add another mailbox to her cell phone account, but she had to keep the Panthers' finances separate from her own, so she got the machine.

"Beth, it's Fred," came a friend's voice. God, he sounded sickly. "Needles on Wheels just scooped three survivors in Collinwood. They've got them over at Cleveland City Psych and one of them wants support. I'm going to try to see him. Call Legal Aid if you don't hear from me by tonight!" Damn. Fred didn't say whether he was going as himself or his alias. He'd promised he would let her know.

Rocky came around nuzzling her. "Hold on!" She tried to fast forward, but pushed the button for the outgoing message instead: "Hi, this is Beth, and you've reached the NorthEast Ohio chapter of the Mad Panther Party..." Ugh! It wasn't just Fred who sounded sickly on this new machine... "...if you wish to report an incident of psychiatric abuse, press one..." Until she could figure it out, the tape had to run its whole loop before she could hear the next message, so she removed her slippers and sat on the living room floor to stretch. "...if you want a copy of our newsletter, have a pen ready to take down our post office box number and press two, or you can download a copy from www.mppohio.org..." Her neck crunched when she leaned it to the right and she shuddered as it released a flood of pent-up tension. Gad, she needed that... "...any news regarding political or legislative action in your area, press three and wait for the beep to make your report..." She leaned forward and grasped her feet for some hamstring stretches, but her hip just hurt too much. For three days it had been warm to the touch. Probably red, too. Damn, she thought: am I getting arthritic already at age twenty-seven? "...If you want to leave a message for Beth or Fred, press four..."

A cold, wet nose startled her. "Hey, not while I'm stretching!"

"...and remember, the freedom to think is the most basic freedom of them all! Fight psychiatric tyranny!" That was followed by a high pitched whine that just got Rocky all worked up. He really had to go. "Hold your horses!"

Beth got the buttons right this time and ran her second message. It was scratchy and she had to turn it up. "...bitch, I want you to put your little hands right where..." Some pervert. She squelched the volume and let it run out. She could erase it later when she had some time to figure out how it worked.

She had her feet all the way overhead, touching the floor behind her in a Yoga position called The Plow when the third message came on: "Hello, this is Christina Petracelli. I write the In Your Face column for the Cleveland Jam weekly, and I'd love to profile the Mad Panthers for an upcoming issue. If you're interested in meeting with me about that, please call me at Area code two-one-six..." Beth rolled over and lurched for her recorder so she wouldn't have to listen to the whole loop again to catch it, but she wasn't quick enough and mashed up her knuckles groping for the shelf where she thought it was. It was like that fingernails scratching on the blackboard feeling all over again and she stumbled to the bathroom to wash the wound and bandage it up. There was blood, but she didn't think it'd need stitches. She sat on the commode and gingerly ran the middle finger of her other hand over it to assess the damage. So of course Rocky pattered in after her and tried licking her hand, setting off a near nuclear meltdown of her impulse control mechanisms. She shouted: "*Anger management, anger management!*" to drown the noise howling in her head. Then, counting to ten before reacting, she just pushed him rudely out the door and slammed it shut. It could have been a lot worse.

Beth washed the wound and taped a big wad of gauze over it. It stung like hell, but it was nothing she was going to go running to the ER for.

She went to the kitchen and opened Rocky a can of dog food to keep him busy while she ran that message again. This time she got the number down on her recorder, flipped her cell phone open and called before she forgot it.

"Christina Petracelli," said a voice that didn't sound anything like the one on the answering machine.

"Hi, Christina, this is Beth McDonald. You left a message for the Mad Panther Party this morning?"

Beth was acutely aware that she sounded nervous.

"Oh Hi, Beth! So you're the voice on that awesome outgoing message?"

"Yeah, that's me." Beth tried to sound nonchalant.

"I love the part about the freedom to think!"

"Thanks! What can I do for you?"

"Did you read the series that the Jam did on homeless people with schizophrenia last month?"

Beth lied. "Oh, of course." She'd heard some parts of it. The usual drug industry propaganda.

"Well, we got some emails telling us that we ought to profile you guys because there was a whole other side of the story."

"There certainly is! I scarcely even know where to begin!"

"Could I come interview you, Beth?"

Beth wasn't ready for that. She was expecting just a phone interview. "Uh..." She coughed. "Could we meet somewhere else?" Anywhere but here, she thought. Place was a mess.

"Can you make it to our office? We're on Coventry..."

"I'd have to take a bus, a train and a bus, but sure!"

"Oh Jeeze. Where are you?"

"I'm in Tremont right now. And I don't have a car." She didn't want to say any more than that quite yet.

"Well, maybe some place that's closer to you..."

"How about if we meet downtown?"

"Any place in particular?"

"How about Max's Bagels, in Tower City?"

"Oh, I love them! Is today at eleven too soon?"

That really hit Beth for a loop. "Deadlines, huh?"

Christina groaned. "You got that right, sister!"

"I'll be there."

"Oh great! Now how am I going to recognize you?"

"Easy. I'll probably be the only blind white girl there with a black leather jacket, black hair and a black dog guide." She paused for dramatic effect. "Or at least I think he's black. That's what they tell me."

The journalist was quiet for a couple seconds. Then she laughed nervously. “I’ll s... I’ll MEET you there at eleven, Beth!”

“Don’t worry, you can say ‘see.’ Bye Christina!”

Beth chuckled at the reporter’s biting her tongue to keep from blurting out the “s” word. Sighted people did that all the time. She sounded sweet, though. Beth thought this might be a fun interview.

She’d made a commitment to volunteer later in the week for an anti-smoking group downtown that needed help canvassing for an upcoming Statehouse vote, so this would be like a dry run for the trek. Fred considered her crusading for that to be a bourgeoisie conceit that only distracted her from the Movement, but so far as Beth was concerned her right to breathe was just as important as her right to be free from forced psychiatric treatment and she was determined to make it there. She had to laugh about Fred. Raised by Trotskyites, her friend in the Mad Panthers was such a silly retro-Sixties radical, but she loved him anyway. Even if he was a man.

No time now for her usual hour on the treadmill. She could make up for it early the next day. A touch to the window told her that it was brutally cold out there. A week of snow and thawing and refreezing had left the sidewalks a slick sheet of ice- no traction to be found anywhere. She dressed in layers and pulled on her heaviest pair of boots. They had a fine network of sharp steel cleats for the ice. Rocky had his bare paws. Beth had thought whimsically about getting him fitted with some little booties. She hated the thought of anything having to go barefoot out there.

Before they were out the door, Beth pulled a knit ski mask over her face, wrapped herself with a big wool scarf and shouldered her knapsack, feeling to make sure her GPS locator was there. As prices came down and the technology got better, more and more blind people were using them to find their way around, but Beth just carried one as a backup. For her, her guide dog was still the best aid for getting around. Besides, it felt better hugging him when she was lonely than it did a cold wafer of microchips.

Going out, she could hear the old guy across the hall coughing and clearing out his lungs. Mr. Silverstein must have been eighty years old and he still smoked like a bad tailpipe. She couldn’t imagine how he’d lived so long. She’d have to remember to bring home some more pamphlets to inflict on him.

The cold slapped her the instant she opened the door to the rickety old stairwell. Rocky knew to take the steps slowly and Beth held on tight to the hand railing. The steps beneath her creaked and swayed, and she wondered how it was that the building hadn’t been condemned yet. On the first floor was a gallery that specialized in Outsider Art. It was fun to go down there and talk to the artists and other characters who came on opening nights. Sometimes they’d even let her feel up the sculptures, but she never stayed long because they didn’t even attempt to enforce the no smoking rule. Rocky finished his business quickly by the side of the building. Beth could hear the custodian rapping at her window about Rocky but Beth was determined to pay the lady no mind if she didn’t have the courtesy to actually SAY something to her about it. Most times Beth cleaned it up with a pooper scooper as best she could anyway, considering her circumstances. He made a cursory scratch with his paws to bury it, and he was ready. His harness and leash in her left hand, Beth turned toward the corner and gave him the command to go. She had spent a considerable time when she first got him encouraging him to lead her at a faster pace than the three and a half miles per hour they’re trained to go at the school. That icy morning, he was no slouch.

The shuttle bus driver saw her coming and waited, beeping the horn. Disoriented by the heated air rushing out of the door and the cold air rushing in, she somehow missed the step and stumbled while getting on, making her feel like a total klutz.

“So get ON, will you?” Some crank on the bus seemed to think Beth and Rocky were taking too long, and she didn’t relent even when she could see that Beth couldn’t. “It’s ten below zero and if you can’t get on without freezing us all, you ought to take the special bus that they have for YOU PEOPLE!”

Hoping she’d “accidentally” slap the bitch, Beth made a point of sweeping a wide arc with her hand to determine if the nearest reserved-for-the-disabled-seat was open, but fortunately for both of them, Ms. Sourpuss wasn’t sitting there.

“...I swear, normal people have to work, while you people get your government checks and your

special transportation and you'd think you'd be content with all that, but noooooooooooooooooo, you gotta' hold all the rest of us up..."

Beth ignored her as she positioned Rocky in the bus isle, close to her seat. "Hey," she said in the driver's direction, "is that Illene driving?"

"No, this is Ron," came a gruff male voice she didn't recognize. "Illene's on vacation. She'll back next week."

"...you got your Americans with Disabilities Act and every sort of free therapy up the wazoo, then you expect hard-working taxpayers to..."

The driver interrupted her. "Hey lady, why don't you just stuff it? I could throw you off this coach, you know!"

A half dozen riders clapped and cheered. Beth could just imagine the look on that lady's face, and she pretty much shut her trap after that. A few blocks later she apparently got off and the driver said: "Good riddance!"

Beth wanted to thank him right then and there, but she could feel he was having a hard time navigating Tremont's bumpy, construction work-narrowed streets and she didn't want to distract him. She had a pretty good idea where his arm would be when she stood to get off at West 25th street, and gave it an appreciative squeeze when she got off. "Thanks, Ron!"

"Any time, Babel!"

Beth didn't like the way he touched her in return, but she wasn't going to make an issue out of it. She knew how to pick her battles.

There was an elevator to the Red Line platform at West 25th street, but Beth used the icy old iron staircase anyway.

Most people are generally cooperative when they're walking alongside a blind person and their dog, giving way and trying to be unobtrusive. But that morning, some asshole rushing down the steps to catch a train stepped on poor Rocky's cold little paw. Beth could feel the impact herself. Rocky gave a muffled yelp and the offending party offered nothing in the way of an apology. He (or she?) just stomped right down the stairs. Beth had to bite her tongue to keep from screaming something appropriate. No use getting herself shot, again. She stopped at the bottom of the steps to give his paw a comforting little pat, and he licked her hand appreciatively.

By the time the train arrived, both Beth and Rocky were shivering and on the verge of hypothermia. The door opened right in front of her and they piled on ahead of anybody else. Beth flashed her monthly pass and swept with her hand again to be sure the crib seat was empty. Then with her strong, numb arms, she lifted Rocky and planted him right down on the seat. To hell with their rules. It was too cold to expect him to lay on the icky tile floor. She ignored the snickering she heard from behind her and hugged him for warmth. The conductor blew his whistle and set the train in motion without admonishing her to get him off the seat. Wise, that conductor.

The train crept out over the bridge above a vast tableau of abandoned factories and mills along the frozen, twisting river that once had blazed with the effluence of industry now long since gone.

Like many other girls brought up Catholic, Beth had pretty much lost her faith in her teens, and losing her sight at 17 had sealed the deal. But a few years later, somebody had given her an audio copy of Rabbi Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and from his startling thesis that God is real and is good, but not omnipotent, Beth was able to start believing in a rather weak but sometimes helpful Deity, sort of a wise, invisible friend who she'd call on occasionally for strength at times of stress and ask to help others who could use it. Sitting on that train inching its way over the Cuyahoga River, Beth could not recall any time she'd prayed for help before something she expected to turn out good, but that's precisely what she found herself doing, and that realization simultaneously amused and alarmed her.

The Tower City complex is in the bowels of an aging skyscraper that was nearly 100 years old. They disembarked amid hordes of cussing local teenagers and wheeled suitcase-pushing foreign businessman fresh from the airport. Jostled on her left and her right, Beth held tight to Rocky's harness and commanded

him to go slow. She could still outrun anybody in that mob, but she wasn't going to let it rush her along. They made their way through the turnstiles and up two flights of stairs to Level two of the complex. Beth knew the way to Max's Bagels well, having gone there for years. She rounded the corner and promptly collided with a gentleman with a thick Russian accent, who apologized profusely. No sooner than she disentangled herself from him, she heard somebody calling her.

"Beth, Beth, over here!" Ohmigod, she's beautiful, thought Christina Petracelli. Does she even know? She must have been told that a thousand times.

Using her own senses more than using Rocky, Beth made it the rest of the way to the reporter's table. "Christina?" Beth worked off her mitten and extended a half-frozen hand.

"Call me Tina! Yikes, your hand is so COLD!"

"Well just between you and me, I'm a member of the Secret Society of the Transylvanian Undead. You haven't eaten any garlic today, have you?"

"Beth, you're too much! Here, sit down." A tall, lean young woman with a blond ponytail, a prominent nose and dark green eyes, sporting knee-length boots under her long denim skirt, with a fake fur coat draped over the back of her chair, Tina closed her laptop computer and set it out of the way to make room for Beth.

"Lemme' unwrap first." Beth felt around for her chair, then peeled off her scarf, her leather jacket and her two layers of sweaters. "Trust me, Tina, the pants'll stay on."

"Did you hurt your hand?"

"Just a little mishap I had this morning. It's not all gross and bloody, is it?" She wasn't sure if the moisture on it was melted ice or something else.

"No, it's fine."

Beth had Rocky lay down underneath the table and covered him with her sweaters.

"Awwwww!"

Beth's ear was fine-tuned to the squeak of Tina's chair that indicated she was leaning down to pet him. "Please, don't!"

"Sorry! So you can see some, then?" Tina bit her lip.

"Nope. Zilch. Just a lucky guess. Actually, everybody wants to pet him, so I just say that automatically. He's a great dog, but too much human contact confuses him."

"How long does it take to train them?"

"From the time they're puppies, about a year and a half. Rocky here..." she leaned over to brush the icicles out of his hair..."...was trained at Canine Guides for the Blind in Indiana. Getting him was sort of a weird *deja vu*, 'cause they had a presentation about them in high school, back when I still had eyes."

"Those are *prosthetic* eyes?!"

Beth laughed. "No, no, no... just a figure of speech. They're the real thing. 'Cept they don't see anymore. Haven't since I got shot through the head. That was a little over ten years ago." She brushed away her hair, turned her head and outlined the scar of the entrance wound on her right temple with her finger, then turned and did the same for the exit wound scar.

"Oh Beth..." Tina touched her hand...

Beth didn't flinch... "Hey, it coulda' been worse. I've still got ninety percent of my frontal lobe!" She cleared her throat to rasp in a bad imitation of Tom Waits: "I'd rather have a bottle in front of me..."

"...than a frontal lobotomy!" Tina nudged Beth's foot under the table and they both cracked up. "Oh Gawd," whispered Tina once she regained her composure, "they're looking at us like we're a coupla' head cases..."

"Oh, you're *not* a head case?" Beth kicked her playfully under the table.

"Beth! What am I gonna' *do* with you?!" Tina pushed herself back in her chair. "You came all this way in that weather just so I could interview you. The *least* I could is order something for you! What do you want? I'll put on the Jam's account!"

"I'd kill for an onion bagel with cream cheese and a cup of Columbian, with three scoops of honey!"

“It’s yours. Just gimme’ a minute.”

Beth petted Rocky while she waited. The icicles in his hair were melting and forming a puddle on the floor. Beth wished she’d asked Tina to get some napkins. Somebody walking by- a woman from the sound of the voice- said “Hi Beth,” but Beth didn’t recognize her and whoever it was just walked on. She hated that, but it happened all the time.

Tina was back shortly with a tray and set Beth’s bagel and coffee down in front of her. “Beth, do you mind if I record our interview?”

“Not if you don’t mind that I do the same!” She dug in her jacket pocket and set her own mini recorder down on the table. “Dueling tape recorders!” She clicked it on.

“Beth, “ muttered Tina, “you crack me up. But perhaps you can tell me who you are and how you got involved in the Mad Panthers.”

“Well, I was a pretty normal, 17 year-old Catholic school tomboy till I got a bullet through my head in a drive-by shooting and I’m totally blind as a result. In addition I suffered some frontal lobe damage. Not enough to blunt my feelings or affect my cognitive abilities, but enough to make me impulsive and disorganized. So impulsive that I really have to watch what I do and say if I want to stay out of trouble.” Another nudge to Tina’s foot. “It’s like having the mother of all ADHD cases, only I don’t take Ritalin.”

“Was your assailant ever apprehended?”

“Well, not officially. No one was ever charged for shooting me, but we’re 95 percent sure it was one Antonio J. Patterson...”

Tina gasped. “You mean the...”

“Yes. The Heights rapist. He’s spending the next three thousand, four hundred years at Lucasville.”

“Thank God.”

“Amen. Everything points to him being the one. The description my girlfriend was able to give the cops, his use of a handgun, the area he worked, the van he drove, all of it. And it was just before he started his big rape spree. I think he was emboldened by the fact he got away with shooting somebody and decided to go to work, big time. The bastard.”

“How many victims did he have? I mean besides you.”

“Fourteen, at least who came forward. In six weeks. None of them were shot, but he probably killed or maimed a few somewhere else.”

“Did he rape you?” She nearly whispered that.

“No. Just shot me and fled.”

“I heard he’s had three attempts made on his life since he got to Lucasville.”

“Poor baby.”

“Well now how did your being the victim of this terrible crime lead you to become a crusader against psychiatrists? It’s not the sort of thing you’d normally expect.”

Beth laughed, harshly. “I’ll grant you that!” She took a deep breath. “I’ll try to be coherent, but I can’t promise anything.”

“You’re doing fine.”

“Remember how I said I had a girlfriend?”

“Yes. A romantic girlfriend?”

“Yes! I was madly in love with a sweet Iranian girl who was going to CWRU. At least I was as ‘in love’ as you can be at seventeen.”

“I’ve been there.”

“With another girl?”

“Yes.”

“OK then, you know!” Beth fought to suppress a grin. “Anyway, her name was Haleh, pronounced like ‘Holly.’ Now, my memory is somewhat jumbled here. It’s not every day you get shot through the head, and it took a while for everything to come back to me, but she was there when it happened and it was her who called 911 and *cupped her hands over the holes in my head to keep my brains from oozing out* while

they were coming, with this violent thunderstorm raging around her. The blood, the thunder and lightning, the sheer horror of it- it must have been like her own personal Apocalypse. I can't imagine what a terrible thing that was for her to witness. And she was *with* me at the hospital every minute they allowed her to be. She must have had a *hell* of a time explaining to her family just *why* she's so concerned about this little American schoolgirl who got herself shot, not to mention the flack she must have caught from my *own* family."

"Oh Beth..."

"So it must have been two or so weeks later that she's wandering around University Circle in the rain talking to herself 'cause she hasn't had any sleep in like, weeks and the university security picks her up and takes her to the ER 'cause she's supposedly 'incoherent.'" Beth made "air quotes" with her hands to emphasize what she thought about that assessment. "Well of *course* the very *first* thing they do is drug her with heavy-duty anti-psychotics and send her home in worse shape than they picked her up in, then the health system at the university is alerted to her case and her first day back they *come to her fucking class* and tell her she's got to go to the counseling office, right in front of her fucking classmates! Excuse me, I get emotional about this..."

"As well you should."

"Thanks. So they tell her 'it has been decided' that she should be evaluated by a university shrink, and surprise, surprise, the shrink diagnoses her as being 'schizo affective,' which supposedly means she's *sort* of bipolar and *sort* of schizophrenic, but really it means they've got to meet their quota of people to brand with that label and she fits the bill, so *bam*," Beth slapped her hand down, "it's written in stone for all time that she's got a brain disorder that only a lifetime of massively expensive drugs can cure. Not even cure, really. Just keep under control. Or so they say..."

"I've heard that same criticism..."

"Yeah, people are finally waking up to it." Beth slurped down some of her coffee. "But about me and Haleh, I'm not too sure of the time frame, but I was still in the hospital when she starts complaining to me 'Beth, these pills are making me sick.' So I say 'Why don't you just stop taking them?' and she tells me 'You don't understand, Beth, they tell me I *have* to. Otherwise I could get expelled from school.'"

Tina groaned. "And that would mean she'd have to go back to Iran?"

"Exactly. In disgrace for failing her family." Now she was trembling.

"So she kept taking the medication..."

"No, the *poison*." Beth was suddenly aware that her fists were clenched and she was perspiring. She counted silently to ten again.

"Take your time, Beth."

"Sorry." She unclenched her fists and laid them flat on the table. "She tells me 'Beth, I'm getting so *fat* and I feel like I'm in a fog all the time,' and I ask her if she's told her doctor and she says yeah she did but the shrink tells her she has to keep taking them 'cause if she doesn't she could go permanently insane. I mean she was so sad, it was like she was drifting away. But at least she was physically there with me a lot of the time and it didn't occur to me till it was too late that she's *stopped going to her classes!* She finally confesses that to me and I ask her 'Why?'" and she says 'Because I don't have the strength to go anymore,'" and I beg her to go to her academic advisor and try to get onto some sort of *plan* to get back on track, but then she tells me it's really because she's ashamed of how she looks, and I ask 'is that just because you've *gained weight?*' and she says 'no, it's because I can't stop making these disgusting *faces*...'"

"Oh no..."

"Tina, do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Yes, but I don't know the name of it..."

"It's called tardive dyskinesia. Unless the drug causing it is stopped immediately, it results in grotesque, permanent disfigurement. Susceptibility varies widely. Some people take anti-psychotics for 20 years and aren't affected, others take a single dose and get it. Haleh got it pretty quickly. I really didn't understand all this at the time. I mean, I'm laying there on the ICU with a hole through my head and tubes

draining the swelling and wires taped all over me and still haven't come to grips with the fact I'm permanently blind and the girl I love is about to get deported..." Beth started getting choked up.

Tina held her hand.

"Thanks." Beth wiped her eyes and forced a harsh laugh. "Funny, they don't see any more, but they still get all teary." She closed them and tried to center herself. A handful of niacin wouldn't have hurt.

"OK now?"

"Yeah." Beth blew her nose. "So I guess you were asking how I got involved in antipsychiatric activism. That's it in a nutshell. I saw them destroy a beautiful, loving girl. They ruined her *just because they could*. It's just as simple and awful as that. Pure evil. If you publish this *please* don't use her real name. Call her Fatima or something. If she's still alive, she might read it on line and I don't want to make things any rougher for her."

"I'll call her Fatima, then," Tina said quietly. "Do you want me to say I've changed her name?"

"Yes. Good! Then *she'll* understand but certain nosy individuals won't."

"So you've been an activist since then?"

"Hardly. It's only been a little while, actually. I had a lot of 'issues,' you know, with losing my sight. It wasn't till after Haleh left that I finally had to accept the blindness. I'd been thinking that 'maybe when the swelling goes down, maybe when the nerves heal, blah, blah, blah.' They'd tried to tell me, but I mean I was only seventeen and you *know* how teenagers are."

"You knew all the answers, right?"

"Ha! All of them. So there's like this double whammy of losing her AND my eyes, and not surprisingly I pretty much fell apart when it all sank in."

"You wouldn't be human if you didn't..."

"But that's just the point! Psychiatrists have defined every negative human emotion as a drug deficiency!"

"So they gave you drugs, too?"

"Thank God, no! I had this awesome neurologist who told the psych team to keep their friggin paws offa' me! He tells 'em: 'she's had severe brain trauma and the *last* thing she needs is anything that'll make her prone to seizures, ' which *all* the antidepressants and *all* the antipsychotics can do. All of them. Heck, my own mom, who's in the mental health field- wanted me to take Prozac, but no *way* was my neuro doc gonna' approve of me going on *that* shit!"

"You mom's a psychiatrist?"

"Psychologist. Teaches at Case."

"Oh, I think I've heard of her! Writes about..."

"...cross-racial adoptions, class consciousness and self image. She's had a half dozen books published. One of them was quoted in a friend of the court briefing to the US Supreme Court a couple years ago. In Mitchell vs. Cohen, I think it was." Beth couldn't help but smile, even if...

"You must be very proud of her."

"Well.... Yeah, but we don't talk much. She *still* thinks I should 'avail myself of mental health services.' That's been a massive sore point between us. You see, Psychology used to be independent of Psychiatry, used to actually *help* people with their talk therapies, but they sold out to the pharmaceutical industry and now they're just auxiliary of psychiatry." It had grown very quiet at Max's Bagels and Beth suddenly had a hunch that customers were eavesdropping. She leaned forward. "Tina, are they listening to us?"

Tina looked around. An old guy to her left turned to bury his head in the paper and a couple girls to her right simply stared, gape-jawed. She shot them a look and they quickly got up and left. A couple transit workers next to them seemed to be paying her and Beth a bit too much attention as well. "Maybe we should take a walk."

"I was afraid of that."

"We can sit down by the fountains."

“Good idea.” Beth slurped down the remainder of her coffee, slathered her bagel with the last of the cream cheese and stood collect her sweaters from on top of Rocky and her coat from the back of her chair. Piling all that over one arm and rousing him with her other, she gingerly picked the bagel up with the arm holding her wraps and asked Tina: “How much you want to bet I send some business executive’s suit to the cleaners with this?”

“Ha! The Tower City cream cheese terrorist! Cmon, let me guide you.” Tina grasped Beth's arm. “It's really crowded this time of day.”

“No, please. Rocky'll get jealous. We'll walk alongside you. He'll steer me out of trouble. Just tell me when you're turning.”

“Let me at least carry your coat or something. Got your recorder?”

Beth had to let go of Rocky's harness for a second to check her pocket. “Yep. Just take my coat, willya?”

Tina unburdened her of it and they set off across Tower City's street level concourse towards the escalators. “Would it distract you to talk while we're walking?”

“A little, but I can manage. Rocky's doing most of the work.”

“How long have you had him?”

“A little over five years. A couple more and he'll be ready for retirement.”

“So soon?”

“This is grueling work for them. All the start-stop-start is really rough on their hips. They get osteoarthritis and that's pretty much the end of their career.”

“What happens then?”

“Some blinks keep 'em as pets when they break in a new dog guide...”

“Blinks?”

“Blind people. We can say it, but if a sighted person did, it'd be a slur.”

“Oh. I'll have to remember that! You were saying...”

“Yeah, some of us keep them for pets, others put them up for adoption...” She took a deep breath. “...and some of them have to be euthanized.”

“Oh no!”

“That won't happen to Rocky! I'm not going to run him into the ground. There's a farm in Pennsylvania that takes 'em, lets them run free and play with the horses or lay around or whatever they want to do. I've heard some pretty good reports on it. If I don't have a bigger apartment when I'm ready for my next dog, he'll have to go there.”

“We gotta' turn left here for the escalators.”

“Let's use the stairs, OK? He hates escalators!”

“I'll just follow you!”

Retro soul music poured from the sound system. A vast mix of Cleveland's businessmen, service workers, students and the poor flowed past on either side. Beth was jostled a few times, but it didn't seem like anything deliberate. The aromas of coffee, candy, leather goods and pizza wafted through the air. Rocky found the staircase and paused there to await Beth's command. She'd been there so many times she could probably find it even without him. Some chattering little kids coming off the steps stopped to admire him and Beth didn't admonish them, but their mother did, loudly. “Andrew! Allison! Leave that girl's dog alone!”

Tina nudged her arm. “That happens a lot, doesn't it?”

“All the time. Is the coast clear?”

“Yep.”

With the hand holding her coat and the bagel, Beth brushed the railing to get her bearing and told Rocky to go. They scooted down the steps fast and Tina rode shotgun by Rocky's side. Beth took one step too many and stumbled at the bottom of the staircase, but Tina caught her arm and prevented a potentially embarrassing fall. “Thanks! Is there any room by the fountain?”

“It's pretty crowded, but I think we can find some space.”

All around the big indoor fountain, shoppers sat eating and talking. On a stage overlooking it, a young man in a white shirt and bow tie, with too much grease in his hair noodled away at a piano. Seeing the three coming their way, a group of teenage truants moved over, but not before smirking and making some crude observations. The piano and the hiss of the water softened the din of voices so that even in the midst of the crowd, they'd be able to talk privately. Beth was wired up on all that coffee and had no appetite for the bagel, so she gave it to Rocky, who gobbled it down appreciatively. “Yeah, I know, he's getting fat,” she muttered, “but heck, a dog's gotta' have a little pleasure in his life, doesn't he?”

“I couldn't agree more. I'd spoil mine if I had one!”

“So where were we?”

“You and the Mad Panthers.”

“Right. Well after my condition stabilized and I got off the ICU, I asked some friends to try and contact Haleh, but she'd closed her Myspace page and never answered any of their emails. So I'm pretty sure she had to go back to Iran. The idea of her having to live in *that* society, disfigured by those damned drugs...”

“I'm so sorry.” Tina touched Beth's hand once again.

“Thanks. Yeah, I took it pretty hard. But I was more pissed off than anything else. Maybe it was a defense mechanism.”

“Against getting depressed?”

“Precisely.”

“Did it work?”

“Pretty well, but I was a total pain in the ass to everybody else. I had to go to this school for the blind in Boston, and I got in a fistfight with another girl the first week I was there.”

“Oh, no!”

“Believe me, two blinks duking it out in the hallway is *not* a pretty sight!”

“I can imagine!”

“No, you can't!” They shared a sick laugh over that and when Beth regained her composure, she said: “They almost expelled me right then and there.”

“So what happened?”

“I had a long talk with one of the counselors and just spilled out all my hate for the psychiatric bastards who ruined Haleh's life and she told me about this group called BrainFreedom International. They're a motley group of ex psychiatric patients who are trying to get the mental health system to respect Human Rights. They told me some stories you wouldn't believe. Stuff that sounds like it was out of the nineteenth century, only it was right now in the twenty-first. Beatings, electroshock, brain mutilation...”

“Brain mutilation?!”

“You know, those like lobotomies we were joking about?”

“They *still* doing those?!”

“They call it 'psychosurgery' and they're using electrodes and lasers instead of icepicks, but the idea is the same. Cut out part of the soul to make you behave. There was a case right here in Cleveland where a woman was rendered mute, incontinent and unable even to feed herself by cauterizing needles they stuck in her brain for her so-called obsessive compulsive disorder, and she won six point seven million dollars from the Cleveland Clinic for it. But what use is all that money?”

“It's hard to believe.”

“That's what everybody says when we try to lay it out for them. And the shrinks are *counting* on that. What they do is just so wrong that they know nobody'll believe it.”

“Till the Mad Panthers come along?”

Beth groaned. “We can *hardly* take credit for decades of work by people like R.D. Laing, Thomas Szasz, Peter Breggin, Grace Jackson and a whole lot of others. They've devoted their *lives* to warning people about psychiatry. And then there's Brainfreedom International...”

“Sorry, I didn't mean to put words in your mouth.”

“Lemme' tell you about Brainfreedom. It started out as the Psychiatric Patients Liberation Front in the in Boston in the 1970's. It was inspired by the womens' and Gay movements and saw itself as aligned with all the other left wing causes of the time. Antiwar, AntiNuclear, AntiImperialist. Thats how some of the old hippies who founded it described it to me. They've got a core group of activists who've pledged to provide shelter to anybody who's fleeing court-ordered forced medication. You see, there are loopholes in most civil commitment laws that make them unenforceable if you cross state lines.” Beth paused. “Maybe I shouldn't be telling you this...”

“Beth! Anything that you tell me isn't for the record doesn't go in the article. Anything. I promise!”

“Thanks. When you don't see anything, it's easy to get paranoid.” Beth shifted her legs awkwardly on the low marble landing that surrounded the fountain. That coffee was going to her bladder. “But about BrainFreedom international- I went to some of their meetings while I was going to the blind school. Learned a lot, went to some demonstrations, got arrested once...”

“For *what?*”

“Trespassing at a private psych unit in Brookline! There'd been a string of suspicious deaths there and we were demanding an investigation. We were picketing legally, on the sidewalk, but management told the cops we we'd crossed over the line and blocked their door and the cops believed *them*, so we all got arrested. Then the Brookline police got antsy about keeping a blink, so they called the school and had them come and pick me up. I was kind of disappointed, 'cause I was looking forward to spending the night, at least! The next day charges against all of us were dropped and we had a big party that night!” She lowered her voice. “But that's when I started seeing the dark side of the movement. I mean some very creepy individuals get attracted to causes like that and I got into a huge argument with a couple women...”

“Any more fistfights?”

“No! But almost!”

“I'm just teasing you, you know.”

Beth could feel Tina sitting just inches away. “That's OK,” she said, almost in a whisper. She had to wonder, did she feel the same electricity? Beth leaned over to pat Rocky, who lay quietly up against the marble. “So I pretty much stopped going to their meetings, but the seed had been planted.” She dug in her pocket for a brush and started working on her long, unruly hair. “I moved back to Cleveland Heights after a year, when I was proficient in getting around with a white cane, and finished my high school education. Then I took some classes at Cleveland State, but my mind was somewhere else and I didn't do very well. But I was working out a lot at the Cleveland State gym, and get this- a woman who teaches aerobics for the disabled there offered me a *job* at the private women-only gym she owns in Shaker Heights! As a personal trainer!”

“Oh, cool! You look *really* fit, by the way.”

“Aw, thanks! Well, that job lasted for four years and I had a total riot the whole time, but the State caught up with us and says: 'She can't work if she doesn't have a friggin' *associates degree* in exercise physiology *and* state certification,' so I had to quit or else she could have lost her license to operate.”

“Did you appeal?”

Beth shrugged. “Wouldn't have had a case. We were in violation of state regulations the whole time I was working there.”

“Jeeze, that sucks. Did you go back to school?”

Beth frowned and shook her head. “I wasn't very good academically even *before* I got my brains scrambled, so no, I didn't.” She pulled hard at the brush, pulling a big tangle of hair off of her scalp with it. “So mostly I've been doing volunteer work and taking the occasional class at the Community College. But I got Rocky here right after I had to quit at the gym!” Distracted by her growing attraction to Tina and needing something to do with her hands, Beth found herself absentmindedly running that brush through his hair. She cringed when she realized how that must look. “Hey, I'm supposed to be telling you about the Mad Panthers, not silly old me!”

“OK. How did they get started?” Tina became aware she was sitting way too close to be professional, and edged back on fountain's rim.

“The first one that we know of was in the UK in the 1990's. They pretty much disbanded after their founder and her husband *supposedly* committed double suicide.”

“You don't believe it?”

“Let's say I'm highly skeptical. The official account is that they jumped off a roof together, but people can be *pushed*, you know.”

“So I've heard.”

“Well in America the first Mad Panthers were formed in Madison, Wisconsin about ten years ago. Some of them were with BrainFreedom. I think a few of them still are, actually although they're quick to point out there's no formal link between the two groups. BrainFreedom is about working *within* the system. Working within the *mental health system*, and if that doesn't work, then working within the *legal* system. Don't get me wrong, that's accomplished a lot of good things. But if you see it...” she paused, “...the way we do, psychiatry is so irredeemably evil the only responsible thing to do is try to prevent them from getting their grubby little paws on people to begin with! Warning vulnerable populations- minorities, poor people, young people, *women*, about psychiatry's war against Freedom, and teaching them how to protect themselves and the ones they love, *that's* what the Mad Panthers are about.”

“Do you think that could that have helped Haleh?”

Beth was quick with her answer. “Yes, I do!” Then she spent a minute assembling her explanation. “Look, they're always warning girls and women about sexual assault. Heck, I oughta' know. But there's another kind of rape. Soul rape. That's what they did to her, and that's what they're doing to millions of other innocent people around the world. I believe if she'd just been *aware* of what could have happened to her, she somehow would have found the strength to not appear so distressed that night and the cops would have just left her *alone*.” Beth fought to not appear distressed herself. The noise all around her and the noise in her head were about to merge.

“I'm sorry, but I had to ask you that, Beth.”

“I know. You're just doing your job.” Beth knew she'd never get over her guilt feelings for somehow putting Haleh at risk by getting herself shot, but as the years went by the stabs of them became less pointed. “So I guess you'd like to know how the Mad Panthers got started here in Cleveland.”

“Please tell me!”

“About six months ago I got a call from a guy I was arrested with in Boston. After all these years he'd looked me up on the Web and says we ought to get together 'cause he just moved here and he wants the scoop on the local activist scene. I was pretty embarrassed to tell him I hadn't been doing *anything*, but that didn't seem to faze him and we sat around all day talking and just sort of feeding off of each other's anger and decided we had to DO something. So Mad Panthers, northeast Ohio brigade was born.”

“Are you like the Black Panthers?”

“They were about self-defense, so in that respect, yes.”

“Are you armed?”

“Me, no. I mean, could you imagine?” Beth laughed but Tina didn't. “As for our other member- whose name I'm not at liberty to use right now- I don't think he is, but I really shouldn't speak for him.”

“What's your platform?”

“The right of anybody to resist coercive psychiatric treatment. By whatever means necessary. We're trying to put some self defense classes together for homeless people, who are *by far* the most vulnerable group to psychiatric crimes, but it's hard to find martial arts instructors who want to do pro bono work, especially with homeless people. Prisoners are another especially vulnerable population and we're planning to protest any trial where the defendant has been forcibly drugged. And public awareness. It's better to inform the public what can happen to them before they ever get mixed up in the mental health racket than it is after, which has been BrainFreedom's focus. We're political. We DON'T offer therapy. It's very important that people understand that! But we're going to nonviolently confront the bad actors whenever they hold

conferences or whatever, do street theater, leaflet churches, parades, block parties, high schools..."

"High schools?!"

"Yes, high schools! We've got this really snarky leaflet called '*Twelve things to tell your guidance counselor if you want to be treated like an animal and drugged against your will.*' You know, stuff like 'I've been feeling sort of blue lately,' or 'Sometimes my thoughts race really fast.' Under the rules the public schools operate under now, they're compelled to refer any kid who says anything like that to a psychiatrist, and you *know* what'll happen then. If they don't comply, they lose all their federal funding."

"But... but that's just normal kid stuff!"

"Not anymore." Beth leaned forward to whisper for effect. "So far as the government and the drug industry are concerned, we're all in need of mental health services! We just don't know it yet." Beth was so close Tina's scent was in her nose. She moved back. "But I know why you're so shocked. What if some high school kid quits taking his meds and goes apeshit with a gun, right?"

"Well, not quite in those words, but yeah, something like that."

"Haven't you heard that some of the worst school shooters were already on psychiatric drugs when they committed the murders, *including* the kids who did Columbine and Virginia Tech?!"

"I've heard it, but I didn't know what to believe."

"Believe it! The damned drugs are causing more violence than they prevent." Beth sighed, reached for Tina's hand, found it and held on. "Look, I didn't mean to dump all that anger on you."

"Beth, you're angry, but I take no offense." She squeezed. "You didn't dump anything on me." She fiddled with her tape recorder. "I've got *more* than enough material for my article. I mean I've got to condense all this down to six hundred words, by eight o'clock tonight. Is there anything else you really want me to write? I'll try to squeeze it in."

"Could you give them the phone number and web address?"

"I'll make sure it's there. Highlighted."

"Thank you!"

"Lemme' get your photo, OK?"

"Oh Jeeze, I didn't expect that! But sure." Frantically, Beth started in on that hair again.

"Hey, you look fine. Do you want Rocky in the shot?"

"Oh, that'd be nice!" She roused him. "You're gonna' be famous, pooch!" Beth hugged him and grinned "Are we ready?"

Tina clicked four times, and Beth could sense her moving around her as she did.

"Wow, you're a real pro with that thing."

"Not really. The Jam's just too cheap to hire a photographer."

"When will your article come out?"

"Next Wednesday. Or the one after that. Depends on what space they have."

"Well Jeeze Tina, this has been great..." It was ending way too quickly for Beth. She felt she could spend a long, long time with this girl and not get tired of her.

"Were you going to take public transit back to Tremont?"

"Well, yeah. Why?" Maybe she could...

"I'll give you a lift home."

"Hey, if you've got that deadline, I shouldn't impose on you like that..." Of course Beth didn't *mean* that.

"Don't be silly. Come on. We don't even have to go back outside. I parked in the garage here."

"You've twisted my arm, girl!"

"Will Rocky be OK in the back seat?"

"Sure."

"So where in Tremont do you live?"

"Jefferson street, right above the Jelly Side Down gallery."

"Oh, that place is so cool! We've covered exhibits there!"

“It gets pretty crazy on opening nights. I like to go down and feel up the sculpture.”

Tina laughed at that and they squeezed into her old Toyota for the short drive across the river. Beth sat quietly but her mind raced. She had to dream up some way to stay close to this woman without being a pest. It had been *so* long since she knew a woman's touch...

She counted the turns that Tina made and knew they were close...

“Here we are. Do you want me to pull in the drive?”

The instant Tina asked that, Beth's plan jelled in her mind. “Yes, please do!” Caution be damned. She had to act.

Her tires spinning in the snow, Tina made it up the narrow drive and the car lurched to a stop.

“Tina, I'm going to ask something that might sound kind of weird.”

“Yes?”

“You see, I still have the visual part of my brain, it's just the eyes that don't work, and if I feel a person's face, I can know what they look like, so could I, like...”

“Yes, you can Beth.”

Beth unbuckled her seat belt, turned and gingerly touched the young reporter's cheeks with both hands. The girl's skin was smooth, taut over prominent cheekbones. Beth ran her fingers to the center of her face to find a strong Roman nose, then ran then up that to her forehead and around her eye sockets. Tina scarcely blinked as Beth delicately mapped the outline of her eyes, then moved up to her hair line to feel the fine, straight hair pulled back in a tight ponytail, then down the side of her face again and lower to her neck and her shoulders, where she could feel Tina's lean, supple musculature. “You're beautiful,” whispered Beth.

Tina put her hands on Beth's. “I'm going to do something awfully unprofessional right now.”

“What?”

“Ask the subject of my article for a date.”

“I won't rat you out. Promise.”

“I've got a pair of tickets for a show at Pandora's Lounge next week. This all-girl Punk band is playing and the Jam wants me to review them. Want to go with me?”

“I'd love to!”

“Pick you up Wednesday, eight-ish, then?”

“I'll be ready to go!”

“Good. I'll call you before then. Or you can call me. Any time.” Then she kissed Beth on the lips.

Chapter Three

The hardware store clerk eyed the new customer suspiciously. The man was wearing dark glasses. There was something wrong with anybody who wore shades after dark. Junkies wore shades. Junkies held up stores for a fix.

But no, thought the clerk on closer inspection, this guy isn't a junkie. He doesn't have that half-dead look. More likely, he was a con man of some sort. He was looking over some plumbing fixtures. Maybe he'd try to sell the store a batch of hot goods. That's it. The guy was probably a fence for stolen tools and building supplies. The clerk saw guys like that from time to time.

"Can I help you, sir?" he asked.

"Uh, yeah. I think so." The man's voice was scared, high pitched and a little cracked. Definitely suspicious. "I need some steel cable. About one eighth or three sixteenths of an inch. Three sixteenths, I guess."

"We got it. How long a piece?" The clerk raised a suspicious eyebrow. He was waiting for the pitch.

"Oh, uh,.. Could you cut me ten sections, about four feet each?"

That's weird, thought the clerk. "Sure. That's fifty cents a cut, on top of the price of the cable."

"Yeah. Go ahead." He didn't ask how much it was per foot. The man paced nervously as the clerk cut the cable. He bit his lip and kept looking over his shoulder. "You alone here?"

Oh shit! "No." The clerk lied. "The boss is in the back. Why?" He was trembling now.

"On, nothing. Just wondering if you heard anything about traffic on I-271. I've gotta take it later, and it's pretty bad out there. Just thought maybe some customers or someone had said something about it." He wiped his hands on his jeans. The man was solidly built, with big, bony hands. Probably a gym rat, or maybe he'd wrestled in college. But those hands weren't all calloused or rough. Definitely wasn't a tradesman, thought the clerk. He noticed things like that.

"No. The storm's keeping the business away. I usually have the radio on, but I left it in my wife's car. I'm not looking forward to the drive home myself. What else you need?" He decided that the guy wasn't going to rob him, and wasn't going to try and talk him into anything illegal. Still, he got the worst feeling about him. He hoped that the man didn't need anything else. Just get out!

"I need some kind of winch that will hold this cable tight. Something that will let it through one way, but grab on if the cable is pulled back." He made a vaguely suggestive picture with his index finger in the fist of one hand. "Know what I mean?"

"I think so." The clerk went to a bin and fished around, while the guy paced some more.

"Cavs are playing the Pacers tomorrow!" said the man, trying to make conversation. "I got a hundred bucks on the Cavs!"

"I only bet on football. This should do." The clerk plopped a small, crescent-shaped gizmo down on the counter.

"Show me how it works. No, wait, I think I can figure it out." He threaded a section of the cable through the winch, then holding it tightly at arm's length, gave the cable a hard yank. It moved smoothly, the teeth of the winch clicking as the cable slid through. Having drawn it most of the way through, he reversed hands and gave the cable a hard yank in the other direction. It moved scarcely a quarter of an inch before the teeth that were the heart of the winch bit into the cable, stopping it cold. He gave a menacing grunt as it pulled tight, then grinned, satisfied. Examining his work, he asked, "This little lever here, this releases the cable?"

"Yeah. You gotta flip it 180 degrees. Flip it hard. Its tight."

The man did so. The cable came loose and slid freely again.

"Got the feel of it?"

"Yeah, good. This'll do. This winch, its a standard item?"

"Some stores have 'em, some don't. We get that from a distributor in Pittsburgh."

"I might need more," said the man, "for my sailboat."

"Oh! How many feet?" Funny, The guy didn't look like a sailor.

"Feet of what?"

"Your boat- how long is it?"

"Its, uh... twenty-five feet. Something like that. How much do I owe you?"

Now thats really funny, thought the clerk. Most guys with boats can't brag enough about them. This guy was full of shit about owning one! Oh, well, it didn't matter. The guy was paying and leaving. "Happy sailing," said the clerk as the man left without saying a word. With one last look at the suspicious sailor, the clerk noticed something. His entire head of hair was slightly crooked, off center. He was wearing a wig. A gray shag wig and dark glasses. Says he's got a boat, but doesn't know how big it is. Jeeze, thought the clerk, it takes all kinds.

A few days later, the same man, minus the wig and the shades, ambled into a large hardware distributor in Wickliffe. While waiting for sales assistance, he engaged a young carpenter in small talk about prices and the poor quality of services these days. They exchanged anecdotes about bad merchandise and the shoddy workmanship in the new buildings going up around town. The carpenter evidently took pride in himself as an old-fashioned craftsman, and the man enjoyed talking with him. He was in an up-beat, breezy mood, just a bit nervous.

Then it was his turn.

"I need some of these." He held out the winch he'd bought earlier. "Got any like it?"

"Sure." The salesman had them in a minute. Nine of them. Definitely a standard item. "What else?"

Some steel plate, two inches by a quarter of an inch thick, a couple feet of it. Some bolts and wooden dowels. A good hacksaw and a table vice. A pair of good pliers. The salesman had no questions, no suspicions. The customer knew what he wanted. Just like dozens of others he serviced every day. The man knew the salesman wouldn't think a thing was amiss. Today he was confident.

In fifteen minutes he was on his way home with everything he needed. It was still a good idea not to have bought everything on one stop.

It didn't take him too long to assemble the first prototype device. A generous loop of cable through a hole drilled in a short section of the steel plate, one end bolted tight to the plate, the other fed through the winch, which was also bolted to the plate. That took a little ingenuity and a lot of drilling, but it held tight on the first try. The loose end of the cable fed back through another hole in the plate. It was almost complete. He would have to remember to make the steel plate a little longer when the device went into use. To get a better grip. Now a length of wooden dowel secured the loose end of the cable, to hold it and pull it tight.

Finally, he pried the little release lever off of the winch. No use for that. Can't let the cable loose once it's tightened.

Heart pounding in anticipation, sweating at the brow, he laid his work down lovingly to ponder it and meditate for a minute. Yes. It was time to try it out. The moment of truth. Knees knocking in nervous excitement, he went to his refrigerator and removed a thick, juicy, half-frozen pork roast. He put a couple of milk crates atop the kitchen table and rested the dripping pork roast on end atop the crates. It was just at head level with him. He took his creation in hand, gulped once, slipped the loop over the roast and yanked savagely on the wooden handle. The roast came off the crates and dangled heavily at the end of the garrote.

It worked! The cable had dug a deep impression all around the center of the roast. It held tight! He pulled again and the cable pressed deeper and deeper into the dead pig flesh. It did not show any signs of loosening up.

The ultimate quiet assassination weapon! Once it goes around the victim's neck, there is no sound, no death gasp. All air cut off, circulation abruptly pinched, the victim would fall instantly to the ground and die in seconds. No need to keep pulling and struggling. The winch took care of that. It would hold hundreds

of pounds of pressure. There would be little or no blood. The 3/16 inch cable was blunt enough not to cut like piano wire. If the victim had any fight left in him, let him try and pull it loose! He'd just strangle himself more! So simple, so terrible, so very clever!

Very pleased with himself, the man had pork roast for dinner that night. Soon, somebody would die.

End of Chapter Three

