

Part Three: Worst Day of My Life.

III.1

Ben was at Rusty's, just finishing his coffee, so weak you couldn't call it black and be fair, when he slapped his forehead and said more loudly than he would have liked, "shit." The cop sitting in the booth next to his turned his head in alarm. Ben turned to him and mouthed "sorry about that." He had just realized that he had to call Bernie Olen immediately, before he quit his job at Elpigen. Stringbean had talked to Degner and so Ben, anticipating his dividends, figured that he no longer needed his mole. He flipped open his cell phone to call the muscle man, but for reasons that didn't quite surface, he changed his mind and banged the cover shut.

When he plopped his ten-dollar bill on the table it was only 7:00, too early to go to the jail, so Ben decided to take a walk around Pleasure Bay. It was a cloudy day, the sticky heat promising a thunderstorm later. The morning's landing path at Logan brought the jets roaring directly above him as they descended towards the airport. Even though the air was gradually becoming unbreathable, and the noise bone-shaking, Ben made it all the way around the loop, and returned to his car. His shirt was damp with sweat and he was breathing more heavily than he should and so he slumped into the seat of the Volvo and closed his eyes for a few seconds before turning the key. The old car responded immediately with its familiar reluctant growl. When he got to the jail Neal was waiting for him.

"Ready to roll partner?" the young man asked with enthusiasm.

"Yup," Ben replied with as much sorrow as he could muster.

"We don't stop until we get Bennett to implicate Degner?" Neal asked.

“Right. Don’t think that will be too hard.”

They went into the jail. When Stringbean entered the interview room he looked more relaxed than he had the previous day. The methadone must have been kicking in. Neal asked him if he wanted a lawyer, and the tall thin man said no.

“Mr. Bennett,” Ben began, “we need to get straight on one detail.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“You told us that you never met a man named Michael Degner, is that right?”

Stringbean looked worried, but nodded his head in agreement.

“There’s a problem here. We’ve got someone who saw you talking to him at his office. Epochal Pharmaceutical, a big building over in Cambridge with a purple sign on top, about three weeks ago.”

“You do?”

“We do. So please don’t lie to us any more. Why were you talking to that man?”

Stringbean buried his face into his hands, and when he emerged he looked somber and thoughtful. “My grandmother worked over there, cleaning floors. I was bringing her some food. Chinese food. She likes that greasy shit. Yeah, that’s when I met him. He was real friendly, told me to come into his office with him. He asked me a bunch of questions.”

“Like what?”

“Like whether I finished high-school, and whether I been in jail. When I told him I finished school he offered me the job.”

“What kind of job?”

Stringbean hesitated. “You know. Cleaning floors. Like my grandmother. Things like that. He said he could help me make something of myself. I’d start at the bottom and work my way up.”

“Up to where?”

“He didn’t say.”

“And you didn’t ask?”

“Nope.”

“Come on now, son. You’re lying to us!” Ben nearly yelled. “Don’t fuck with us for one second more. You’re in a lot of trouble, but we can make this go a lot easier on you. But only if you stop bullshitting us. Why did you talk to Michael Degner?”

Stringbean did not respond. For the first time since he had met him, Ben thought the young man looked hard. He repeated, “Why did you talk to him?”

“I want a lawyer.”

“Big mistake, Winfred,” Neal said gently. “You talk to us now and I promise we’ll work hard to make this right for you. As right as we can. Don’t take the fall for this asshole. What’d he say to you?”

Stringbean only hardened more. “Lawyer.”

“You don’t want one, not really, not now. Talk to us. It’ll only help you later. I promise you that,” Neal said.

Stringbean looked pensive. After nearly a minute of silence, his face cracked, and once again the softness that seemed to token his true self came through his eyes. “He wanted me to scare someone.”

“Who?”

“That white guy who got shot. Morton.”

“Mortensen?”

“Yeah. Him.”

“What exactly did Degner want you to do?” Ben asked.

“He said just to *bother* him. He said I should pretend some gangster shit, and just make him worry some. He showed me a picture of him on the computer and he told me where he lived and where he worked and what his schedule was. He said I should follow him around and, you know, scare him.”

“Did he tell you why he wanted you to do this?” Ben continued.

“He didn’t say.”

“And you didn’t ask?”

“About right. All he said was that he needed that man Morton to be scared. Made it sound like it was almost a joke.”

“Did he tell you to hurt him?”

“No. And I didn’t hurt him. Shit, I didn’t hardly do nothing. I once followed him home from work, and when we got on the train I bumped into him and looked at him mean and funny like. He said he was sorry and didn’t look scared at all. That’s all I ever did.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s right.”

“Did Degner give you that pistol?”

“No, man, I told you. I found it.”

The cops greeted this response with silence so String continued: “ I never

got around to doing nothing. I waited around his apartment over near the park a few times, waiting for him to come home. But when he didn't show up I just left. Really, man, it was only that one time, on the train, that I did anything to him and what I did wasn't even bad. And then that night, that night when he got shot, I was waiting around for him near his apartment, but I didn't see nobody and I didn't do nothing. And when I left I found the wallet and the cell phone and the gun stacked up on the sidewalk, I just picked it up. I didn't even see him that night, I swear to you, and I didn't know that shit even belonged to him. I didn't kill that man, I swear. That Degner paid me five-hundred dollars, but I didn't do nothing. I just found that shit piled on the sidewalk."

"And what about the computer?" Ben asked in a matter of fact voice.

"What computer?"

"The computer in his pack."

"I never found no pack, and no computer."

"Who'd you sell the computer to Winfred?"

"Nobody." The kid was becoming exasperated.

"What time did you get to Brian's apartment?" Neal interreputed.

"What time? I don't know. 8, 9, 10. I don't know."

"Did you go into the park?"

"No."

"And you didn't see Michael Degner or Brian Mortensen?"

"That's right. I was just walking around on Washington Street, not doing much of nothing."

"Winfred, why didn't you tell us about this yesterday?" Neal asked.

“Cause I knew that guy got shot, and I knew you’d blame me. Which is just what you’ve gone and done, even though I didn’t shoot that man.”

“Are you willing to testify about this?” Ben asked.

“If it’ll help me get out of this jail.”

“But let me get it straight: you were paid to hassle Brian Mortensen?”

“Yeah. But I didn’t do nothing. Just found that shit.”

Ben put his hand on Stringbean’s boney shoulder and said, “I believe you, son. We’ll see what we can do.”

“You will?”

“Yes. I promise,” Ben said.

“You really believe him?” Neal asked as they stood outside the jail staring at the Charles River in the sweltering heat.

“Maybe.”

“Why?”

“Degner set this poor kid up. He’s waiting around Mortensen’s place himself. He knows String is in the neighborhood, he sent him there, and so he shoots Brian himself and then leaves the gun on the sidewalk hoping the kid’ll pick it up. And if Stringbean doesn’t, some other sap will. He’s got his fall guy. He reported the gun stolen so no matter how fishy it looks he can’t be tied to it. He wanted something from Brian, probably what’s on the computer. Bastard wants to create a master race of super-sleepers, and Brian had the ticket.”

Neal, his eyes squinched in perplexity, asked, “You think we can crack him?”
Before Ben could respond, he answered his own question: “Only one way to find out.”

“Right.”

And the two cops trudged through the thick and stinking air back to Neal’s car.

III.2

A hot fog blanketed the city and it seemed to slow everything, people, cars, buses, trains, even the pigeons, to a crawl. The traffic across the river to Cambridge was particularly bad and Ben and Neal didn't speed up their ride by talking. They finally arrived at Kendall Square and parked in front of Epochal Pharmaceuticals. As usual, the beautiful receptionist offered them a drink, and they both asked for sparkling water. "Put a lime in mine, would you please," Ben called out to her. She shot him an angry look. Surprisingly, Degner made them wait for only a few minutes, and when he arrived he glared at the detectives with contempt.

"No point beating around the bush, Doctor Degner," Neal began. "We know you talked to Winfred Bennett, the man we have in custody for the murder of Brian Mortensen. We have a witness who saw you speaking with him."

Degner looked pleased. "And who, pray tell, is Winfred Bennett?"

"A tall, thin black man. Early twenties. He was visiting his grandmother who cleaned your windows. You brought him into your office. Offered him a job."

"Oh, now I remember him. Winfred? What kind of name is that? It doesn't sound like it fits a killer. But for once you're right. I did meet the kid in the halls one night and I did take a fancy to him. He looked, I don't know, needy but not entirely stupid. And he seemed to be very nice to his grandmother. I thought a little pep talk might do him some good. I told him I'd be willing to hire him, that he could get his life on the straight and narrow. Stuff like that. Community outreach I suppose you'd call it. Kid didn't take me up on it, so that was that. And now he turns out to be a murderer. Oh my gosh."

Ben glared at him. “Kid tells us you hired him to hassle Brian Mortensen.”

Degner looked surprised. “Hassle Brian? What for?”

“To scare him away. Or soften him up. Seems you had a stake in breaking down his defenses. You wanted Sweet Dreams in your shop, he wouldn’t leave Elpigen, and so you were getting ready to threaten him.”

“For an asshole, you have some imagination, I’ll give you that much,” Degner said. “I did talk to that young man, Walter Bennet, but only about his future.”

“We don’t believe you, Dr. Degner,” Ben said.

“Oh heck,” Degner smirked.

“We think you’re a lying fuck, just like your Nazi father!”

Degner jumped out of his chair and lurched towards Ben. Just before he reached him he froze and his face became red. He wanted to say something but, putting his hands on his desk and staring at them for a second, he restrained himself instead. He returned to his plush chair.

“I think that all this stuff here,” and Ben waved aimlessly to the walls and the ceiling of the luxurious office, “this Epochal Pharmaceuticals of yours, is just a cut above what the Germans were trying to do. You know, cooking up the master race in the laboratory. Getting rid of every blemish on the face of the earth. Wiping out the retarded, the deformed, the Jews, the Gypsies, the homosexuals. No blemishes, just pure Aryan paradise. That’s what their scientists were up to. And that’s what you’re up to.”

“You are fucking insane. Do you know that?” Degner said with conviction.

“So, give me a pill. Make me better than I am,” Ben replied calmly. “Better still, just answer one question: did you hire Winfred Bennett to work Brian Mortensen?”

“Of course not.” Degner stared at them. “And even if,” he paused and the smirk rose ever so briefly and curled the surface of his lips, “even if I did, who would believe a stoned hoodlum like Winfred Bennett? My word against his. Guess that puts an end to your case, doesn’t it? Kid had the gun, and you’re trying to pin this on me?”

“Your gun. All the way from California. How’d he get it?”

“My gun that was stolen years ago and somehow ended up here in Boston. The kid bought it from some Mexican who didn’t know East from West and ended up here.”

“You think a jury’s going to believe that?”

“Don’t care what they believe. I care about what they can prove. And the answer there is, absolutely nothing. The gun was reported stolen. Yes, it’s a big coincidence that it ended up in Boston, but I had nothing to do with it. By the way, I don’t suppose my fingerprints were on it, were they?”

Neal ignored his question and replied, “maybe we should find out what a jury thinks. What do you say?”

Degner paused and the hatred returned to his eyes. “I say whoopee. By the way, I read the article on the Internet. My father never told me that story about meeting Hitler before. Probably because he didn’t think it was as important to him as you and your asshole partner here seem to think.”

Ben winced and had to fight hard to contain himself. He succeeded and didn’t say anything, or show anything on his face. At least as far as he could tell.

“Or maybe he was embarrassed by it,” Degner continued. “He was just a kid who stumbled into something he didn’t understand. My father fought in World War Two. And then he was a banker in Texas. Decent enough guy; your normal small-town

businessman. End of story. Your slander of him is outrageous. But I guess I shouldn't complain. I'm enjoying watching you make fools of yourselves. Creating a master race in the laboratory! If only you knew how far-fetched and stupid that idea really is. Look, you can't possibly prove a thing against me, but you won't admit it. Boston's finest...a couple of losers like you. Look around, Detective. This is my building, my company. We're doing research here that will change the face of medicine, that will end a big chunk of human suffering. You think I'd jeopardize all this? For what? To put a bullet into Brian Mortensen? You've got to be kidding. And you dare accuse my father of being a Nazi?"

"We'll have more questions for you later, Dr. Degner," Ben said as he moved towards the door.

"Goody gumdrops, my friend," Degner sneered. "Goody God damned gumdrops."

Without saying a word Ben and Neal walked to the Stata Center. Only when they arrived at their bench did the conversation begin.

"We might have a problem here Ben."

"Tell me about it."

"Degner's not going to crack," Neal said. "And he's right. If we got him on the stand, it would be his word against Stringbean's, and no jury is going to believe that poor bastard. Even if it was Degner's gun that plugged Brian."

"Afraid you're right about that."

"What do we do?"

"Think."

Neal waited until Ben had finished his cigarette.

“You finished thinking?”

“Yeah. Better stick with Plan A,” Ben said. “Bernie goes undercover. Join up with Epochal, and then at least we’ll have an inside man. Maybe he can find something out.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t know. But at least we’ll have eyes on Degner.”

“What good is that going to do?” Neal sounded worried.

“Don’t know.”

“But we gotta get something on him before String takes the fall for this.”

“Right.”

“Damn, Ben, another black kid going down the tubes. And this guy walks free.”

“Nazi fuck.”

“Oh come on, man,” Neal said in exasperation, “you’re pushing that story line way too hard. But let me get it straight. The Nazis wanted to create a super-race of white boys. You think Degner’s old man liked the idea and passed it on to young Michael. Who now is making naughty in the laboratory? Geez, Ben, that’s not gonna make the cut. It could have been just what Degner said it was. His father was just an American kid taking a bike ride in Germany.”

“He liked Germany, remember. How’d he put it? He was ‘tremondously impressed’ by how clean everything was. Even the underbrush in the forest had been cut and stacked neatly. That shit’s sick.”

Neal broke into a smile. “No, man, being neat ain’t a crime. And being impressed by Germanic orderliness doesn’t make Degner senior into a Nazi. Hell, I bet your own apartment isn’t exactly a mess.”

“You’d be surprised.”

Ben’s phone interrupted their conversation. It was his brother Micky, making his monthly call to check up on his father. As usual, when Ben heard his brother’s enthusiastic voice his heart sank. In the last year or two Micky had taken to calling him “Old Ben,” a phrase that made no sense to him and whose sound made him shudder. As always, his brother had exquisite timing. He’d invariably call when Ben didn’t want him to. Once he’d even interrupted a session with Holly.

“He’s doing okay Mick...No, he doesn’t quite know what’s going on, but he’s okay. He still gets along well with Edith. His room is clean and he still shaves himself. Sort of. Anyway, all things considered, not too bad...No, he doesn’t need any money...No, I don’t need any either...I’m glad you won the case...Okay...Bye.”

When he snapped the phone shut, whatever energy he had flowed out of him. He closed his eyes and slumped into a memory.

The night before, on September 10, 2002, Ben knew that his mother would die very soon. She was unconscious, lying in bed at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center, in a room that she shared with three other old women. Only a curtain gave her any privacy, but she had been oblivious to her surroundings for the past couple of weeks. Considering her condition, her spirits had been remarkably high for the past few months, and she had always answered “fine” when asked how she was. Her good cheer irritated his father.

“Fine? How can she be fine?” he said to his sons. “She can barely talk. She ain’t been out of that bed since she broke her knee. She ain’t fine. She’s suffering something terrible!”

Micky had tried to explain that she was a positive person, that she had made her peace. Abe wouldn’t listen. He fought every step. He had insisted that she see the physical therapist, even though the PT had confided to Ben and Micky that her knee was far beyond repair and that exercise was pointless. Still, Abe tried to get her to move her leg, to talk, to respond, to do anything that resembled real life. When she stopped speaking, he tried to pull her back from unconsciousness, almost yelling at her.

The night before, Abe had, as always, spent the day in a chair next to her bed. Micky and Ben had gone out for dinner, and when they returned they sat with their father.

“Pop, I think we should go home now.”

“Okay Mick. Shana,” he said to his unconscious wife, using her Jewish name, which he had only started doing when she became ill. “Shana!” he nearly yelled. “I’m leaving now! You understand? I’m leaving! I’ll be back tomorrow. Early! You understand? We’ll talk more then, okay?”

Ben’s mother didn’t respond.

The yelling had seemed to exhaust Abe’s last bit of energy, and he promptly fell asleep in his chair. Micky wanted to wake the old man up and take him home, but Ben told him to wait for a few minutes. Both brothers were half dozing by the bed when they were awakened by Abe’s voice. He had emerged from his nap and had immediately

resumed his refrain, “Shana! I’m leaving now! You understand? Shana! I’m leaving now. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

To the amazement of her sons, their mother had snapped out of her oblivion. She looked at their father straight in the eye, and said quietly, “You already told me that.”

These were the last words she spoke.

The next day she died at noon, but Ben wasn’t there. He had attended the Departmental ceremony commemorating the September 11 bombings of the previous year. He had kept the moment of silence with his fellow police officers, and had unhappily huddled with them around the TV to watch the events in New York even though he thought the whole memorializing business a frivolous bit of wish projection. The politicians were acting as if the war was in the past, when in fact it was only heating up. Ben believed that there was no time to rest. It was, in his mind, the time to fight, to strike back. Destroying Afghanistan was a start, but there was more work to be done, more bombs to drop, more enemies to kill. The problem was, he wasn’t sure where his enemies were. Still, he was itching for a fight.

When the ceremony was over, Ben headed to his car with the intention of driving to the nursing home. He was interrupted by Captain O’Toole who knew about Ben’s mother but still asked him, somewhat sheepishly, if he could help him out. A large group of angry white kids had gathered in front of a Mosque in Dorchester. The police were already there, but their numbers weren’t as high as O’Toole wanted. Since so many officers were deployed throughout the city, hoping to ward off an anniversary bombing, they were short in Dorchester. Ben was tempted to complain but resisted the impulse, and instead went with Neal to the Mosque.

Ben didn't typically enjoy the sight of red-faced Irish kids screaming bloody murder, but on this day he actually felt some sympathy and the idea of torching the building wasn't completely unappealing to him. The spectacle of the bearded men and wrapped women standing on the sidewalk in front of the Mosque, looking terrified, only irritated him and when he saw the stupid rage on one boy's freckled face, he wanted to hug him, tell him that he understood. Ben had a mad fantasy of running with the boy through the swamps of Vietnam with his old M-16, firing at everything that moved.

The police sent the boys home, and Ben was finally able to leave. He got back to the nursing home around 2 in the afternoon. His mother had just died, Micky told him. "Where you been?" was his father's one remark to him.

Neal woke him from his reverie. "Yo, partner, what's up?" he asked gently.

"Not much."

"Your brother okay?"

"Yeah."

Neal knew when to quit. "What's next?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? You're supposed to be the brains of the operation."

"Don't know where to go next. Might have a dead end here. Degner's right. We can't pin a thing on him. String can sing like a bird on the stand and no jury's going to believe him."

"Just another kid gangster," Neal said sadly.

“Afraid so,” Ben admitted. “And even the gun won’t help much.”

“Damn.”

“Right.”

“Just hope that eventually Bernie turns something up. If he gets inside, that is.”

“He’ll get inside,” Ben said reassuringly. “Maybe he’ll find Brian’s computer. Or what was on the computer. Maybe one day the E.S.M.R. will pop up, and Bernie’ll know where it came from.”

“Just wait, then?”

“Maybe.”

The two cops, reeking of sweat and frustration, walked slowly back to their car. They drove across the Charles, whose water looked fetid and and seemed to be steaming, and back to the station on Ruggles. When they entered they were welcomed by a blast of cold air, which didn’t cheer them up. After chatting up Sally for a minute, Ben slumped into his chair and put his feet on his desk. He felt the weight of painful fatigue deep below his skin. Everything hurt and so he closed his eyes but realized he couldn’t possibly sleep. He was tempted to go outside and smoke, which is what he always wanted to do when he felt so tired and had so much to do—which was most of the time—but resisted the impulse. Instead, he lugged himself up and went to see Chloë.

“Hello dear,” he said to her.

“What do you want now?” the gnomish woman said without looking up from her screen.

“Nothing. Just passing time.”

“Oh, I get it. Nothing good has come from my superb analysis. I found you the kid you wanted—what’s his name? Williams—but you couldn’t tie him to your murder. Right?”

“Righto. Kid’s clean.”

“Sorry big man,” she said turning to look at him with what almost looked like sympathy on her gnomish face.

“Me too. It would’ve been a beauty. I could have been a champion.”

“Not you, don’t worry. You’ll always be a bum. And don’t ask me for any more favors. The techies are all still probing for meanie Muslims. Bad guys blow up trains in London, so next thing they think is that they’re going to blow up trains here. So now they want us to figure out how to screen train passengers in Boston. I don’t like bad guys much either but they’re not that stupid.”

“Too bad you’re right about that. And I’m back to square one on my case.”

“Poor bastard.” This time her sympathy was so fake that it almost hurt.

“Thanks, pal.”

“Any time, big man, any time.”

When his phone rang Ben, with memories of Micky’s call a little too fresh, reluctantly flipped it open. It was Fern. She sounded excited, giddy almost. She had something to tell him and wanted him to come over right away. Ben asked whether she could tell him on the phone, but she said she couldn’t. With more enthusiasm than he’d care to admit, Ben told her he’d be there in a few minutes and excused himself from the station. He didn’t mention to Neal where he was going.

Fern buzzed him up almost as soon as he hit the button, and when he reached the fourth floor he was surprised to find the door to her apartment open. He knocked firmly nonetheless and called out, “hello! Anybody home?”

“Come in,” he heard a voice, unmistakably Fern’s but strangely distant, say. When he entered the hallway he was greeted by a blast of air far hotter than even the furnace of Boston’s streets. He walked through the hallway and into the living room. Fern was on the floor, sitting in a lotus position, surrounded by three or four space heaters. She was wearing baggy gray sweat pants and a shapeless long-sleeved black shirt. Her face was flushed and glistened radiantly with moisture. Ben nearly gasped when he saw her.

“Hi Ben,” she said, her voice as if from a dream.

“Hello Fern. You’ve been exercising?”

“You’re a good detective,” she smiled. “Just finished some Bikram. I like to sweat. It’s nice.”

Ben shook his head. “Impressive. But, man, it’s hot in here.”

“Makes me feel better. Keeps me sane, really. Come sit down,” she said and she unfolded herself and stood up. She stretched her arms above her head and smiled once again. “Delicious,” she said. Then she sat down on the couch and patted the cushion next to her to indicate that’s where he belonged

Ben debated whether to choose a chair instead, but without much thought he ended up on the couch. He sat there for a moment, the perspiration building rapidly on every part of his body, while she continued, as in a trance, to smile at him.

“So where are the girls?”

“They’re gone,” she said happily. “Out with Zina, their nanny. Off to the Swan Boats in the Public Garden, I think. For some reason they seem to like those ridiculous things. So what can I do for you, Ben?”

“For me?” he asked, genuinely puzzled. “I thought you had something important to tell me?”

“Oh, that’s right,” Fern replied, and she started to giggle. “Life’s funny sometimes, isn’t it.”

“Yeah, funny,” he said as he wiped the sweat out of his eyes. “You mind turning those heaters off, and maybe putting the air-conditioning back on? I’m boiling.”

“Sure, honey,” she said and forced herself to stop laughing. She sprung up gracefully from the couch and hopped from heater to heater, shutting each off. Then she skipped over to the wall and adjusted the thermostat.

“Don’t worry,” she said reassuringly, as if she were talking to a child, “everything will be alright soon.”

“Thanks,” he said, as she settled herself back into the couch, uncomfortably close to him.

“Now,” she said, patting him on the knee, “where were we?”

“You were about to tell me why you called me?”

“Right,” she said. Her smile disappeared, stolen by the force of gravity, and for a moment she looked lost. “I’m not doing so well.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Things have been tough?” he asked as he again wiped the sweat from his eyes.

“Very. And they’re not going to get better. That’s why I called you. I have to

organize some sort of memorial service for Brian. His mother is insisting. I told her I wasn't going to come back to California, and she said that I had to have a service, any kind of service, here. For her and his father, for the girls. They're flying out next Friday. What am I going to do, Ben? I'm afraid the woman will go beserk if I don't do this."

"Then I guess you'll have to do it."

"But I can't possibly handle that. I don't know how. I'm not religious. I've never been to a memorial service before. Or a funeral."

Ben was impressed by the depth of the woman's ignorance. "It's pretty simple. Invite a few people. Brian's co-workers, people from Elpigen, friends. Then they just take turns saying a few things about Brian. That's it."

"That's it?" she looked befuddled.

"That's it. You can do it right here in your apartment. This living room is plenty big enough. Just rent a few chairs, buy some flowers, and you'd be all set. Just don't turn up the heat."

She didn't respond, but looked at him hopefully.

"And you'll need someone to be, to be..." he paused and looked for the word. "The master of ceremonies. You know, in charge. Someone to welcome people when they come in, seat them, and introduce the speakers. Do you know anybody who could do that? A priest or a minister, maybe?"

"No," she said with a pout.

"Ask Bernie. Maybe he knows a Rabbi."

She looked at him in anger. "I wouldn't ask that man for the time of day!"

Ben studied her but didn't press. "What about Casper?" he then asked. "Maybe he'd know somebody. Or maybe he could do it himself."

"Casper's a nitwit."

"No one else? Nobody in this building? No friends?"

"I don't have any. I'm sorry, Ben," and she started to weep. She leaned into him, putting her head on his bulky shoulder, her hands grasping his weighty arm.

Ben allowed himself to smell her hair. Her sweat had mingled with her shampoo and smelled like an almond invitation to a world of damp pleasure. He felt a wave of desire rush over him, but years of practice had taught him how to rein in such feelings. Plus, he was far too hot to move. Still, he allowed her to continue clutching him while she sobbed, even though her body only added to the miserable heat that had blanketed his body.

Fern broke away from him suddenly, and looked at him with her red eyes. "What about you?"

"Me?"

"Would you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You know, like you said, be the master of ceremonies. Be in charge, welcome people, introduce the speakers."

"Me?"

"Why not. You're...I don't know...imposing. You seem to be in charge of everything. Why can't you be in charge of this?"

Ben tried to imagine himself presiding over such an event but couldn't. "Fern, I've never done anything remotely like this before. I wouldn't know what to say. Plus, we don't really know each other. I never even met Brian."

"Please, Ben. You must know your way around funerals. Isn't death your speciality? You must have gone to a million of these things. And I don't know how to do it. I need your help."

She grabbed his arm again and continued. "Please. You wouldn't have to do much. Just introduce people who wanted to speak. That's all. You wouldn't have to say anything about Brian yourself. Like you said, we'll do it right here in the apartment. I'll hire somebody to clean it up and rent some chairs, buy some flowers, or whatever you tell me to do. There'll only be a few people. Brian's parents, Casper and his family. Our nanny and her boyfriend. That's it. It'll be over in a few minutes." She paused. "Then his parents will go back to California and leave me alone. Please, Ben, please."

"What about Bernie?" he asked again.

She didn't respond for a moment, her face hardening. "No."

"Why not?"

"He's, he's..."

"Gay?"

"He's a prick, and he's not coming into my house. That's final."

Ben felt a surge of near anger. "Come on, Fern," he said. "They were close. Bernie needs to be here."

"No," she replied, pouting like a child.

A surprising surge of loyalty to the muscle-man took over and so Ben laid down

the law. “Look,” he said, “let me put it this way: no Bernie, no me. If he can’t come, I’m out.”

At first she looked as if she was going to scream, and then Fern began to cry. But she quickly stemmed the flow of tears and pulled herself back together. “Okay then,” she said, “have it your stupid way! He can come. But don’t expect me to talk to him!”

“I won’t,” Ben replied. He was tempted to ask her the obvious question: did she know about Brian’s affair with Bernie? But the subject was so drenched in painful discomfort that he decided to skip it. Instead, he walked to the window and said, “Great view.” Even before the words had completely left his mouth he felt genuinely stupid.

“What?” she replied.

“Great view. Of the Hancock Tower. Beautiful building, I’ve always thought.”

She grunted some response he couldn’t understand.

As he stood there staring at tall buildings of his old town, Ben began imagining the memorial service. He didn’t get far because he quickly saw a gaping hole in the scene he was developing. “What about your parents?”

She froze.

“Fern?”

“What?”

“What about your parents?”

“They have to come,” she said softly. “Brian’s mother insisted.”

“When was the last time you saw them?”

“Years.”

“They know Brian’s dead.”

She didn't answer.

"Fern?"

"What?"

"Do your parents know that Brian's dead?"

"Yes. Brian's mother told them. I don't know how I'll survive."

She stood up, put her hands over her eyes and began to rock back and forth on the balls of her small, perfectly arched feet. Ben thought he heard a soft groaning, but he wasn't sure.

"I'll take care of it," he surprised himself by saying. "I'll take care of everything, Fern. Trust me. I'll call them, if you want, explain what's going on, when they should arrive, that sort of thing."

"You will?"

"Yes. And Neal'll help."

"Neal?"

"My partner. Detective Simpson."

"The black man?"

"Yes."

"Oh nice," she said and she broke into a crooked and unconvincing smile.

For a second Ben was tempted to cash in on the little bit of good will that was now permeating the apartment and put his arms around the lovely woman standing near him. He walked back towards her, but then halted and asked, "where's your bathroom?"

She looked disappointed and gestured towards the next room.

After peeing and washing his face with cold water, Ben felt a familiar sense of resolve. When he started walking towards the door, Fern, the radiant smile back on her face, intertwined her arm around his, and walked with him. Now she felt more like an affectionate daughter than a seducer.

“Thank you, Ben,” she said warmly. “You’re a kind man.”

“I don’t know about that, but you’re welcome,” he said, feeling confused. He had no idea how he would explain this to Neal. But when he smiled back at the lovely woman on his arm he knew he’d think of something.

III.4

For a week, Ben's nights were haunted with visions of Fern's apartment filled with people he didn't know, and he was in the middle of it, in charge of it all. But the night before the memorial service he slept unusually well. He had gotten into bed early, around 10, and it took him a couple of hours of thrashing around to fall asleep, but when he did he stayed asleep until an astonishing 6:30. He awoke fresh, on the wings of a dream.

He was a pitcher, towering on the mound, as tall as Randy Johnson, and with his cap pulled low and mean like Roger Clemens. His fastball was blazing but he had learned early in his career to save his arm, and so he threw mostly off-speed stuff. When he needed to, however, he could throw serious heat. A batter didn't know what to expect from him, and so he was unhittable.

While he was in the shower singing *Maria* from *West Side Story*, his phone rang, and he rushed out to get it. It was his father.

It took a while to decipher what the old man was saying, but after a minute of confusion Ben determined that Abe could not remove his lower denture, and that the old man was in great pain. And then his father did something he had never done before: he asked Ben for help. Ben said he'd come over right away and take him to the BU Dental School Clinic. Student -dentists worked on your teeth there, but it was easy to get an appointment there, even on weekends.

As he left his apartment and glanced at President Sarmiento, Ben flirted with anger. Much to his own surprise he had been looking forward to putting on a suit and

going to the memorial service. He had made a few calls and arranged the order of the three speakers: first would be Brian's mother, then his father, and finally Casper. Fern's parents were unwilling to speak since, her father had told him, they had only met Brian once, at Fern's wedding. Ben had asked Bernie to say a few words, but the muscle-man was adamant in refusing. And Fern was even more resolute in her decision to say nothing. She would allow her girls to close the ceremony by saying "good-bye Daddy" in unison. Ben was almost nervous, and the little bit of excitement felt good to him as it coursed through his veins. He had written his few remarks down, and wanted to practice them until he had them memorized.

Good afternoon everyone. My name is Benjamin Kaplan. I'm a police officer and a friend of the Mortensen family, and I would like to welcome you today. We're here to honor the memory of Brian Mortensen. His death was a terrible loss...a terrible loss to his family, to his friends, and to his profession. He was a husband, a father, and a son, as well as scientist who was doing research trying to help people with insomnia get back to sleep. He was a gentle man who hurt no one, and yet he himself, and all of us here today in this room, were hurt. Today we're gathered together to say good-bye to Brian.

He asked Moira to review his first draft, and she had persuaded him to remove the sentence, *And I pledge to you that we will find Brian's killer*. There was no need, she had argued, to raise the possibility in the audience's mind that the wrong man was behind bars, and that the real killer was still on the loose. He had seen she was right and so took the sentence out. With that done she had given his remarks her stamp of approval. She even volunteered to attend the memorial, a surprising offer that he gratefully accepted.

Before he had gone to bed that night he had already memorized his little speech, but he still wanted to practice more before the actual service. And now his father had intruded. Fortunately, the memorial was not scheduled until the late afternoon. Still, Ben had wanted to practice some more.

When he got into the old Volvo, he realized that his father must be in tremendous pain, for otherwise the tough old bird wouldn't have called. His anger was replaced by confusion. Ben couldn't figure out how a denture got stuck. Abe had worn them for decades, and never had any trouble before.

Abe was waiting on the front porch of the Work for him, and with some difficulty he stood up even before Ben had gotten out of the car. Ben took the old man's arm and helped him into the passenger seat. It was the bending down in order to get in the front seat that was hard for Abe. He had great trouble extending his legs and twisting his torso to fit into the seat, and he winced in pain.

“You in Pop?”

“Yeah, yeah,” his father grimaced.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, everything's peachy.”

The ride to the clinic was quiet. Ben couldn't tell if Abe was ashamed of his infirmity, or grateful that his son had responded to his call. Or maybe his mouth just hurt him too much. Ben filled the silence with some chatter about Micky. He had won a big case for the hotel workers in Los Angeles and as a result gotten a nice boost to their health benefits. He had told this story to his father several times already, but the old man

always seemed pleased to hear it again. Ben said that Mick was doing great work, a sentiment he didn't really feel, and his father nodded in agreement.

The dentist who saw them at the clinic was a tall Indian man, bearded and wearing a turban, who exuded graciousness when he introduced himself as Doctor Singh. He welcomed Abe warmly and helped him into the chair, and made sure Ben also had a place to sit. After looking into Abe's mouth he gestured for Ben to come over and look. He explained that a significant amount of food deposit had built up, that gum tissue, much of it inflamed, had been growing over the dentures. Abe had probably stopped taking the dentures out at night, and he certainly hadn't brushed his teeth in a long while. His mouth was a bruising catastrophe.

Ben's heart sank as he looked at his father sitting hopelessly in the examination chair, and he realized the extent of his father's incapacity. And what this meant he would have to do for him.

The dentist went to work. He tried to gently pry the denture out with his gloved hands, but he couldn't. He used what appeared to be floss to loosen it up, and a long tool whose purpose Ben couldn't determine. Each time he touched Abe's mouth the old man convulsed in pain. He moaned, he groaned, he muttered "my god" in a tone of disbelief. When the pain became unbearable he waved the dentist off angrily and said, "just let me die."

Ben had watched people suffer in pain for most of his adult life. But usually he was able to do something for them, at least call the ambulance and have them taken to the hospital. This time all he could do was watch his father tremble with pain.

The dentist tried again to lift the denture out of Abe's mouth, and the old man nearly screamed again, "just let me die!" Ben had heard his share of screams, but this one, so old, so weak, the scream of his father, reached deeply inside of him and made him tremble as well. Then his father said, in a quiet voice, "I gotta pee." The dentist didn't want to stop his work, but reluctantly did so.

Ben helped his father out of the chair and over to the bathroom. When Abe returned his pants were wet. Ben escorted him back to the chair.

The dentist, who had been working on Abe for 45 minutes, was beginning to look frustrated, but he continued to speak to both Abe and Ben in his elegantly soothing manner. He tried the floss again but each time he pulled the string across Abe's inflamed gum, the old man nearly jumped out of his chair with pain. Dr. Singh looked perplexed, and so he finally gave up and picked up the phone.

A few minutes later another dentist, a large burly man who was older, entered the room. He introduced himself to Ben as Doctor Kober and he had a strong Israeli accent. He peered inside of Abe's bleeding mouth, and then asked Dr. Singh a few questions Ben couldn't understand. He picked up the phone, and a minute later a nurse entered carrying a long needle. Kober shot Abe up with the novacaine, and for the first time Ben wondered whether Singh had known what he was doing. Kober, whose tone of voice was at odds with the polite words he was uttering, explained to Abe and Ben that he would return in a few minutes. By then the novacaine would have taken effect and he would remove the denture. He exited the room as quickly as he had entered, and Singh sheepishly followed him. Ben was left alone with his father, and he didn't know what to do. He stood up from

his chair and went over to Abe, put a hand on his shoulder and said, “the doctor will be back in a minute, Pop. This’ll be over soon.”

His father was still trembling and said, “worst day of my life.”

“I’m sorry Pop.”

“Should just let me die.”

“The doctor’ll be back in a minute, don’t worry Pop.”

“Okay,” Abe replied weakly.

Kober returned carrying what looked like a plyers. He asked Abe to open his mouth, and the old man complied. “Feeling numb?” Kober asked.

Abe had to think. “A part,” he answered.

“Okay, here we go then,” Kober replied. He reached into Abe’s mouth with the plyers, put one hand on his jaw and yanked. Abe screamed in pain but the denture came out. After glancing at for a few seconds, the dentist popped it into a plastic bag.

“You take this,” Kober ordered Ben, “and you don’t give it back to him. He needs at least two weeks for the inflammation to go down. Then you call me.”

Ben put the denture into his pocket and agreed. He helped his father out of the chair. The old man told him he had to pee again, and so once again Ben led him to the toilet. Once again Abe returned with his pants wet.

The ride back to the Work was silent except when Abe repeated, “worst day of my life.” But he had stopped trembling.

“You’re not gonna have the denture for a little while.”

“How’m I gonna eat?”

“Soft foods.”

Abe mulled this prospect over. “Okay,” was all he said.

When Ben pulled in front of the Work, Edith was waiting for them. Abe got out of the car, and Ben reminded the old man that he wasn’t going to have his denture for a couple of week.

“How’m I supposed to eat?” Abe asked again.

“Soft foods only. Try to rinse your mouth with warm salt water, like the doctor said.”

“Doctor,” Abe repeated. “Shit.”

“You’re not going to be able regular food for a while. Just take it easy. Eat soft foods. You know, like soup. Maybe you should take a nap.”

“Yeah, good idea, I’ll take a nap.”

“Okay, then. I’ll see you later Pop.”

“Yeah.”

“Take good care of him, okay Edith?”

The old woman smiled.

As Ben drove to the police station he made a list of how many phone calls he’d have to make. His father was losing the ability to take care of himself, and so when he said he wanted to die, Ben was neither surprised nor entirely unsympathetic. Ben didn’t quite understand how he had ended up taking responsibility for the old man. He certainly hadn’t asked for the job. He wondered if he could just hire somebody to do it for him.

III.5

When Ben, dressed in a blue suit that was too small around the waist, entered the apartment, the music he and Fern had agreed upon, Bach's *Second Orchestral Suite*, wasn't playing. Instead was the waltz from Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, which sounded weird to him. Cheap bouquets of flowers were posted randomly throughout the hot living room. The rented folding chairs had been arranged in a ragged semi-circle facing the gigantic and luminous window.

Fern greeted him at the door, but only her eyes acknowledged, barely, his existence. She seemed unable to speak. The simple black dress she was wearing, so cheap and utterly without shape that it could have been purchased at the Salvation Army, was a size too big for her. But even her awkward gown could not conceal her loveliness.

Emma and Kate were dressed in matching blue velvet dresses. Hovering around a woman who was focused exclusively on them and was unmistakably Brian's mother, they seemed more alert and engaged than Ben had ever seen them before. Ben wondered if they had ever had this many people in their home before, and then he decided, with some certainty, that they had not.

Brian's mother was a heavy set but sharply put together woman, whose gray hair had never been dyed and whose chubby cheeks seemed ready to smile. She exuded competence and her two granddaughters hung on her every word. Her husband, Brian's father, stood a few feet away from his wife, but it could have been a mile. He was short and lean, looked like a man who ran marathons, and it was obvious that only one thought was running through his mind: I've got to get out of here! Now.

Casper, dressed in a drab polyester suit, had come with his wife and three cheerful children, each of whom was staring into some sort of hand-held machine. Bernie Olen, whose thickly muscular body filled every inch of his finely tailored dark brown suit, was standing with the Casper's family, and seemed riven by the sort of anxieties an adolescent boy dragged to an unwelcome family gathering would feel. He winced a brief smile, which spoke volumes of his discomfort, when Ben met his eye, so Ben walked over and a put a hand on his powerful shoulder.

“How you holding up, pal?”

Bernie looked at him with vacant eyes. “Not too bad,” he replied without conviction. “The Zoloft helps.”

“Getting any sleep?”

“Oh yes, plenty of that.”

“Good job. Hold steady, okay?”

“Okay,” Bernie replied feebly.

At Ben's request, Casper's own parents, who had met Brian once, had come. These two seniors were sitting next to each other half asleep on the couch. Zina, the Mortensen nanny, was standing next to her boyfriend, a Chinese graduate student in chemistry. She wasn't looking at him but at Emma and Kate, and seemed annoyed to have been displaced by Brian's mother.

Finally, at the back of the living room, with their backs to the gloriously big window that opened up a perfect view of the Hancock Himalaya looming in the distance, were the two people who were unmistakably Fern's parents. Her mother was about the same size, and her hair, even though it was cut short and graying, still showed remnants

of the same luxurious curl. She was thin, nearly emaciated, wore a plain and inappropriately bright flowery dress, and she seemed not to have the energy to push herself out of herself. Ben couldn't tell whether she was over-medicated or simply exhausted. Fern's father, also rather short, was standing as straight and stiff as an iron rod. He had a black mustache and the starched white shirt and tie he wore with his black suit looked like they would suffocate him. He was staring angrily into the living room of people but was speaking to no one. Certainly not to Fern.

The only person comfortably circulating around the large room, introducing herself to people she didn't know and making graceful small talk, was Moira Monahan. She even approached the forbidding Mr. Tarkanian and offered him her hand, which he took without looking her in the eye. "A mensch," is what Ben thought. He considered the possibility of emulating her and also walking around the room, talking to people he did not know, and perhaps even introducing them to each other, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He let himself off the hook by silently giving Moira this job. So he too joined the ranks of the miserable and stood uncomfortably speaking to no one.

The buzzer rang. It was Neal. Like Moira, he too was at ease as he first shook Fern's hand, and then Ben's, then went to each and every person in the room. He made some sort of joke with Emma and Kate, and then lingered for a moment with each of their four grandparents. Ben watched with admiration and a twinge of jealousy. His partner looked like someone who knew his way around funerals. When Neal stopped to make small talk with Casper, Ben decided to join the group.

“Say, Dr. Weinberger,” Neal said, “my partner here says that cigarettes go straight to his brain and clear out the cobwebs. He says that they make his neurons fire. Any truth to that?”

Casper perked up. “It’s not really a neuron firing. It’s the nicotinic acetylcholine receptor, and it doesn’t really fire. But it does lead to the firing of a neuron. This can be done in several ways. Most receptors are ion channels, meaning that when something, like a neurotransmitter or a drug or calcium binds to them, they change. Nicotine causes the receptor to go from the closed state to the open state, allowing sodium molecules to pass through. It’s sodium which triggers the electrical firing of adjacent neurons. So, yes, nicotine certainly stimulates brain activity.”

“You mean this big dope here isn’t wrong when he tells me that smoking helps him think,” Neal said warmly putting his hand on Ben’s shoulder.

“Well, thinking is a complicated business, but...”

Before Casper could continue his lecture he was interrupted by the buzzer. Ben noticed that Fern hadn’t budged so he went the door and pushed the button himself, opened the door, and prepared with some trepidation to welcome the next guest. It was Michael Degner. Ben was too stunned to respond, but he didn’t need to since Degner ignored him. A few long and confident strides and he was in the apartment. He went directly to Fern, who looked at him without expression as he leaned over to kiss her cheek gently, a kiss she didn’t resist. Then he followed the same path Neal had blazed and went to each and every person in the room to shake their hand.

Ben's head became heavy with mute anger, and for a moment he couldn't see straight. He remained at the door, paralyzed, staring at the graceful figure of the tall doctor making his rounds.

Neal, alert to what was happening inside of partner, approached him and shook his arm lightly. "Hey pal. Pretend he's not here."

Ben looked at Neal without recognizing him. "What?"

"Don't think about him," Neal commanded. "Close your eyes and count to ten."

Like a child, Ben followed the instructions. And the little exercise worked as he snapped back to life. His first thought, though, when his head cleared, was to grab Degner by his shoulders and throw him out the window. For a second he saw the glass shattering and Degner's lifeless body on the street below. He closed his eyes again, this time more tightly, and tried hard to clean the slate. When he did so, he realized he had forgotten every word of his little speech. "Oh shit," he said out loud.

"I know. This punk's got some nerve," Neal said.

"I gotta go."

"You can't leave, man," he said, quite worried. "You're in charge here."

"I'm not leaving. Gotta smoke."

"Well get your ass back here quick. This gig's gotta get off the ground. You volunteered, so you gotta come through," Neal said as he put his hands on Ben's shoulders.

"Yeah, I will. Don't worry."

Not wanting his absence to be long, Ben decided to break all the rules of public decency and smoke in the hall. He walked to a corner and lit his Nat Sherman and inhaled

deeply. He felt a tingle in his brain, and vaguely remembered something that Casper had just said about receptors. He forced himself to crack a small smile when he realized that Degner had receded and that his little speech had just flooded back into his memory. Crushing the cigarette with his foot and leaving it on the floor, he forced himself to concentrate only on his speech and walked resolutely back into the room. Fern, apparently catatonic, was standing in the same spot where he had left her. He put his hand on her elbow and said softly, “time to begin, okay?”

She looked meekly into his eyes and like a child said, “do I have to?”

“Yes. It’ll be okay.”

“It will?”

“Of course,” he lied. “Why don’t you go get your parents and find some seats. Tell them we’re about to start.”

“I can’t,” she quietly wailed.

Ben glanced back at the Tarkanians, neither of whom had moved an inch. He looked back at Fern and saw the fear in her restless eyes.

“Okay, don’t worry. I’ll do it.”

Ben walked her to the window, where Mr. and Mrs. Tarkanian were still standing, and said in a voice loud enough for all to hear, “please folks, why don’t we get started now.” It sounded right to him, and the fact that everyone in the room responded immediately by taking a seat gave him confidence. Fern picked the chair that was furthest away from the window, and from her parents. Ben, quite puzzled, watched as her mother stood for a moment and looked imploringly for her daughter. When Fern kept her eyes

fixed to the ground, Mrs. Tarkanian gave up and with a well practiced sigh sat next to her husband, who looked like a statue and not a man, in the front row.

“Good afternoon everyone,” he began. “My name is Benjamin Kaplan. I’m a police officer and a friend of the Mortensen family. I would like to welcome you today.”

He managed to speak without faltering, and all the words he had rehearsed dozens of times came back to him. But his voice sounded hollow and unrecognizable to him. When he was finished, Brian’s mother, cool and with no expression of her grief, stood to speak. She told the small crowd the story of her son’s childhood. He had loved both computers and chemistry since he was a little boy. When he wasn’t fooling around in the garage with his little chemistry set, he was in his room building radios and taking apart whatever new machine his father had brought home for him. She reminded the audience twice that Brian had never gotten less than an “A” in any class he had ever taken. “He was a good boy,” were her final words, and on these words she nearly choked. But she caught herself and instead smiled at the small audience.

His father recounted his son’s academic achievements at Cal Tech, and explained that his son had received two Ph.D.’s before he was thirty. He sounded as if he were reciting a Curriculum Vitae.

Only Casper showed any real emotion. He ended his remarks with “Brian was a nice man. He was always kind to the secretaries and the lab technicians. Nobody disliked him and I can’t believe someone would hurt him. It’s a terrible thing, a terrible terrible thing.”

And then he broke down crying. From the middle of the room Bernie let loose with a ferocious sob and nearly screamed, “oh my God!” The rest of the room was stone silent.

When it was over Ben stood up and invited everyone to have coffee, which Zina, having purchased three large cartons of Dunkin Donuts specialty brew, was going to serve. All the guests stood up and began slowly to migrate towards the kitchen. Only Fern remained seated in the living room, staring out the window. Her father came up to her, stood over her for a moment, and then barked loud enough for Ben to hear, “Fern! Don’t make a fool of yourself! Take care of your guests! Right now! I tell you just once.”

She jumped up obediently, looked at her father with terror, but didn’t know where to go. Ben intervened by again putting his hand on her elbow and guiding her towards the kitchen. “Do you need some help Fern?” he asked gently. She looked at him helplessly. “Come on, we’ll get some coffee.”

“But I don’t like coffee,” she said.

“That’s okay,” Ben replied. “You can have some tea. Mr. Tarkanian, would you like some coffee?”

The older man, who seemed tiny standing next to Ben, froze in silence and stared at him with equal parts of hatred and fear. Ben edged Fern away from her father and towards the kitchen.

Neal was waiting on line for coffee, and Ben handed Fern to him as if he were passing a baton in a relay race. He desperately wanted to leave the room, but Moira, sensing his discomfort, approached him. She intertwined her arm with his, and whispered, “good job.”

He didn't respond.

Ben watched Michael Degner talking quietly to Casper, who looked as tiny compared to him as Tarkanian had to Ben. The rage that he had suppressed gave way and pulled him towards his enemy.

"Don't," Moira said.

"Fuck off," he snarled, separating his arm from hers and zoning in on the only man in the room as tall as he.

"What're you doing here?" he whispered to the only man in the room as tall as he.

Degner looked pleased to see him and whispered back, "paying my respects, Detective Greenberg, just paying my respects."

Ben choked on his fury but kept his voice low. "How'd you find out about this?"

"From my new employee, Bernie Olen," he said as he nodded cheerfully towards the muscle man.

Ben looked at Bernie with contempt.

"It's time for you to leave."

"I'll leave when I'm ready, Sir."

"You leave now or..."

"Or what? You'll do what?" Degner whispered, his face just inches from Ben's own.

Ben looked at Degner with disbelief. He was trapped; he could do nothing at all.

"I'm going to nail your Nazi ass to the fucking wall," he whispered back into Degner's ear.

Degner separated his head from Ben's and looking serious but not angry he, very quietly but forcefully, responded: "I didn't kill him. I did hire that black kid to harrass him, which was stupid, I know. But that's all. And you'll never even pin that on me since I'll deny doing it."

"You're a lying prick," Ben replied. "Just like your father, and I'm going to prove that. And you'll spend the rest of your life regretting who you are."

Degner's mood shifted abruptly back to rage but he too kept his voice quiet: "if you keep after me, Detective, I'll have your badge. Don't forget who I am. All I have to do is threaten to move my company back to California, and I can have the Governor on the phone in thirty seconds. You think I'm going to let you do this to me?"

"You don't have a choice. I'm a cop, remember?"

"Yes, I do. I do have a choice. And if I choose to, I can destroy you. And if you mention my father once more, that's exactly what I'm going to do. I came here to pay my respects to Fern. I've known her for years, and I came to say good-bye. That's it. Back off right now if you know what's good for you."

Ben stared into Degner's unrevealing eyes and knew that he had to stop, and immediately, before he did real damage, but he felt unable to resist the energy racing through his body towards his head. He was about to lunge at Degner when, once again, Moira came to the rescue.

"Ben, you haven't introduced me to your friend."

Ben glared at Moira incomprehendingly. Looking at her long, bespectacled, almost un-pretty face, he saw who she really was and softened immediately. He closed his eyes and managed to count to three.

“Moira,” he said slowly, “this is Michael Degner. Chairman of Epochal Pharmaceuticals.”

“Mr. Degner,” she said holding out her hand, “I’m Moira Monahan. I work in the District Attorney’s office.”

“Doctor Degner.”

“Excuse me?” she said.

“Please address me as Doctor Degner.”

“Oh,” she said. “Will do. But then you have to call me Doctor Monahan. I have a Ph.D., you know.” She smiled.

“In what?” he asked.

“French Literature.”

Degner smirked. “French Literature? What can you do with that?”

“Nothing,” she said defiantly. “That’s what’s so wonderful about it.”

Ben looked at her with pride. He knew that because of her the crisis had passed. He excused himself, leaving Moira to stand alone with Degner, and made a quick round of the room where he said good-bye to everyone. He nearly had to force Mr. Tarkanian to shake his hand, but the rigid little man relented and did so. His wife barely acknowledged his existence.

When Ben got to the street to smoke a cigarette, he remembered what his father had said just hours before: “worst day of my life.”