

Part Four: Falling.

IV.1

Business was all too brisk in the homicide department during the summer of 2005. After years of decline, for which the politicians routinely and always publicly congratulated themselves, the murder rate in Boston was climbing once again. Boys were shooting each other with some regularity in Dorchester and Roxbury, usually in order to transact some small piece of drug or gang business, but sometimes triggered by offenses as trivial as a condescending look or a snide remark. Respect was all the rage in the ghetto, a precious commodity worth dying for. Ben was repulsed by the whole ugly business. Popping each other for no good reason, these kids hoped only for a look of fear in another's eye. They were so far from family and community, not to mention city or country, that the only thing that mattered to them was the pitiful recognition of the streets.

Bobby Doyle lectured him often that the root cause of the violence was unemployment, inadequate schools, the indifference of the government, and institutional racism. Ben thought his dear friend was full of shit. His own parents had grown up poor in the West End of Boston, and they had remained intact. For Ben the real cause of the epidemic of gun violence was brainless boys who fathered countless children and then abandoned them, and desperate girls who needed a baby to make themselves feel better about their dim prospects, and so started giving birth at age 15. Most of all it was a welfare system that supported them no matter what they did or how many children they had.

The only heroes in this bleak landscape were the women who worked day and night to keep what remained of their families whole. Women like Winfred Bennett's grandmother, Ada Mae Williams

Working the blighted streets during the summer of 05 drained Ben not only of hope but also of energy. The damp heat sapped him and made his joints ache; the young victims, falling like flies, saddened his soul. But more than anything else it was the silence of the citizens that left him so exhausted. One case in particular came close to breaking him. Early evening, August 1, the Carter Playground in the part of the South End that was far from gentrified. Boys, most of them 11 or 12 years old, were trying out for a Pop Warner football team. As at least a dozen witnesses agreed, at around 7:30 a black SUV pulled up to the Camden Street entrance of the park. As soon as it did, an older kid, sixteen years old, who had been watching the football players, jumped on his bike and started pedalling furiously to get away. A tall man in a red hooded sweatshirt jumped out of the SUV and started chasing the kid, shooting wildly as he did. When the coaches on the playground heard the shots they screamed to the kids to run across the field towards a building on the other side. The kids obeyed and ran, but the cyclist decided to use them as cover, and rode his bike onto the field and into their midst. The presence of so many children didn't deter the shooter. He kept firing until two boys, both 11 years old and hoping only to play football, were lying dead on the ground. The cyclist got away unscathed, and the shooter returned casually to his car and then disappeared.

The killings were horrific enough, but the silence that swallowed this crime made Ben cringe with despair. There were many witnesses and, because the park was only a few hundred yards from the Boston Police Headquarters in Roxbury, the police had

arrived at the scene in less than five minutes. It was easy to find the cyclist, a local gang-banger, but even though the witnesses all agreed that he had begun to run before the shooter left his SUV, the kid denied he knew who it was that was shooting at him. “Must have been some crazy mutthafucker, that’s all I know,” was what he said. And then the witnesses themselves started to clam up. Most said they had their eyes on the field and so didn’t get a good look at the shooter. Others claimed that they had seen nothing. No one could say for sure what sort of car it was. The local cops were sure that the shooting was another sad chapter in the long battle between two South End gangs, Lenox Street and 1850, both named for buildings in the nearby housing projects.

Even Willie McGee was little help. The problem wasn’t that he didn’t have any names to give them; it was that he had too many. For Willie knew exactly who was in each gang, and the shooter could have been any one of them. But the bangers were disciplined and provided alibis for each other. Ben’s impulse was to bring them all in and beat the shit out of them until they talked, but he knew that Captain O’Toole wouldn’t go for his plan. Nor would Neal.

Ben couldn’t forgive the neighborhood for being so unwilling to help the cops, but he could at least understand their reasoning. The logic of revenge was palpable on the streets and the fear of exposing whole families to violence was real. After all, the most popular tee-shirt of the summer was the one with the logo “Stop Snitchin” on it. These were people who couldn’t afford to move out of the neighborhood and so had to live with the consequences of their actions. Still, all those witnesses and not one willing to take a stand or to talk to the cops made Ben feel weak at the knees.

Three weeks after the Carter Playground shooting there was a break. A witness stepped up and he identified the shooter as one Devon Anderson, a 23 year old from Mattapan who was out on \$5,000 bail and awaiting trial on charges of stabbing a woman in 2004. The cops arrested Anderson, but when no one else would finger him as the shooter, and the one witness began to express some doubts himself, the case evaporated. The ministers and community activists howled, the chief of police pleaded for cooperation, the politicians asked for a state witness protection program, the Mayor went on a campaign to ban the “Stop Snitchin” tee-shirts, but the murder rate climbed, and the people who lived in the blight continued to fear the gangbangers more than they trusted the cops.

By October, there had been more than 70 homicides in Boston, a 10 year high, but arrest warrants had been issued in only 20 cases.

Neal and Ben could barely look each other in the eye during this dreadful stretch, for they hurt in ways too different to be bridged. Even if he was always pinched by anguish when he saw a lifeless teenager sprawled on the bloody sidewalk, Ben’s reaction tended towards rage at a corrupt welfare system and irresponsible citizens. But he had learned to keep his mouth shut when he had such thoughts because for Neal every dead kid could have been his own. Neal was especially thrown by the Carter Playground shooting. When he first saw the two dead boys lying still on the football field, he froze in silence, and he remained in a sullen funk for weeks afterwards. The only thing that pulled him out of it was an idea, which he took to be inspiring, being peddled by an MIT computer scientist: give every kid in Boston a laptop computer, the professor argued, and the crime rate would go down. He was designing a super-cheap computer, which could be

powered by either a small crank or a solar battery, and would cost only around 100 bucks. Most people, including Ben, thought the idea was looney, but Neal clung to it with the hope of a drowning man. More than once, and stupidly, Ben couldn't resist firing caustic comments at his partner. As if the problem was information flow...megabytes as the cure for teen pregnancy...oh great, now they can email their plans to each other, or download maps of likely targets....doesn't that MIT asshole know there's not much sun in Roxbury. Neal became so disgusted with Ben's sarcasim that he nearly stopped talking to him. This frightened Ben a little bit, so he stopped. He didn't pretend to be supportive, but he no longer made any jokes about crank-tops. Which never did make it to the streets.

IV.2

When Fall arrived, colorful and welcoming, the air crisp, best of all seasons in Boston, Ben had slowed to a crawl. His right knee was throbbing even when he wasn't on his feet, his lower back was tight as a drum, and every morning it was more difficult than the previous one to get his long legs out of bed. Even his monthly meetings with Holly Laurent at the Marsh Hotel didn't perk him up. He was no longer able to make love to her twice during a session for he'd fall deeply asleep after the first time and then feel so groggy when he awoke thirty minutes later that he barely could move. Even Holly's skillful touch proved futile.

And then Red Sox let him down. Schilling and Foulke were injured, and Clement stunk it up almost every time he took the mound. Renteria led the league in errors by a shortstop, Varitek's bat cooled, Millar couldn't hit homeruns, and so by mid-September the Yankees had surpassed them and charged into first place. The Sox made the playoffs, but only because the Indians collapsed during their final homestand, and then they were swept in three by Chicago. After the glory year of 2004, their loss could no longer be interpreted as the charming tragedy of a cursed and beloved franchise, but instead was failure plain and simple.

And then there were the visits to the Work. On one cold October day, Ben decided to visit his father earlier than usual, three in the afternoon. He hadn't been there in nearly a week, and he feared that the old man's room would be a disaster. As he was about to enter the front door, a large young man, bulky and soft, nearly bumped into him on his way out. It was Paul, his Brooklyn-dwelling writer son.

“Paul?” Ben fumbled.

“Dad?” Paul fumbled back.

Paul Kaplan had a untidy mop of curly, nearly blonde hair. His jeans were paint-stained his sweatshirt dull-gray, and his running shoes tattered. His long heavy body was tapered upwards, with shoulders narrow, hips and thighs wide. His nose, unlike his father’s, was not hooked with a perfect semitic curve, but instead was awkwardly thick, like the sculptor has just thrown it on. His face was still burdened with concentrated patches of acne. Miriam had told him that when he was younger Paul had refused to heed her advice to go to a dermatologist, and that she had now given up. Ben looked at his son with dismay.

“What the heck you doing here?”

“Visiting Gramps. Haven’t seen him in a while.”

“You’ve been here before?” Ben said too suddenly to disguise the hurt in his voice.

Paul’s gaze dropped to the ground. “A few times.”

It didn’t occur to Ben to ask his son why he didn’t come to visit him as well during these trips to Boston. Instead, he said, “Good of you to do so.”

“Nah, I enjoy it.”

“Really?”

His son smiled. “Sort of. Sometimes. I like it when he rants.”

Ben smiled back. “What was he ranting about today?”

“Fascists who took his parents’ house away. The West End rant.”

“You’ve heard that one before?”

“Yeah,” Paul smiled knowingly.

“He say anything nasty about me? God-damned cops, etcetera etcetera?”

“Not this time.”

“Last time?”

“Let me see if I can remember. Yeah, I think so. But only a little.”

“Guess that’s an improvement.”

“I guess.”

“You take the Fung-Wah?” Ben asked.

Fung-Wah was the name of a bus company that ran express buses from Chinatown, New York to Chinatown, Boston. A one-way ticket cost only 15 bucks.

“Yeah,” Paul said, with a inkling of dread on his face as he anticipated what would come next..

“That company’s had problems, you know,” Ben said. “One of their buses caught fire last year. Another tipped over just a few weeks ago. Driver, who didn’t speak a word of English, was doing 80 on an exit ramp.”

“Really?” Paul feigned interest.

“Yeah, really,” Ben replied as he reached into his pocket to fetch his wallet. “Why don’t you take the train back to the city? I’ll give you the cash.”

“No thanks, Dad. The bus is fine. I’m sure it’s not dangerous any more.”

“Come on, let me treat you.”

“No it’s okay. It’s probably safer than ever after the accident. They’re probably being more careful, what with the cops on their trail and all.”

“Maybe.” There was some logic in the thought, Ben had to admit.

“The trip up here was fine, Dad. Faster than the train. They showed a movie on the bus. It looked good, but it was in Chinese.”

“Too bad.”

“Yeah. So don’t worry.”

“Worry’s my middle-name, you know.”

“That’s what Mom says.”

“How is she?”

“Fine.”

“Alan?”

“He’s fine too.”

“David?”

“Fine three. He’s in Mexico. Near Oxaca. Helping out in a village, building a school. He says he likes it and that his Spanish is now pretty good.”

“Then everything’s fine. Peachy as your grandfather would say.”

“Right.”

“Hey, tell me something. How come people still flock to New York City? Everybody knows it’s the fattest target in the world. How come you stay there?”

“Only place I’ve ever known. Too lazy to move, I guess.”

“You don’t remember good old Boston?”

“Nah. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. You were only five. But what about all the newcomers, all the kids who move there?”

“I don’t know. Maybe 9-11 was the only real thing that ever happened to them.”

“Jesus,” Ben said as he ruminated on this possibility, which he didn’t understand.

“Take the money. Please.”

“No can do, Dad. But thanks anyway. Listen, I gotta run, catch my bus.”

“I’ll scoot you over to South Station. My car’s right here.”

“No thanks, Dad. You gotta visit Gramps.”

“He can wait. It would be a pleasure.”

“That’s all right. I don’t mind taking the T. I’ll be fine.”

“Fine?”

“Yeah.”

“You meet any nice Jewish girls recently?”

Miriam had been telling him for years that Paul had not, to her knowledge, had a girlfriend. He didn’t meet people easily, Miriam said, especially women. And he didn’t put much effort into his improving his appearance, which Ben had to admit was not attractive. As passionate as he was about his writing, he didn’t seem interested in anything else.

Paul didn’t respond to his father’s question.

“Any dates?” Ben prodded.

Paul smiled. “People don’t date any more Dad.”

“They don’t?”

“No. They get drunk and then they hook up.”

Ben knew the meaning of the phrase. “Sounds sad.”

“It is sad. That’s why I don’t do it.”

“Good for you.”

“Yeah, good for me. Listen Dad, I really gotta go,” he said as he put his hand out for a shake.

Ben took his son’s hand but couldn’t let go. “What are you working on these days?”

Paul looked annoyed and hesitated before speaking. “A novel.”

“Really? What’s it about?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Yes I do.”

Paul hesitated again, took a breath and said, “post-nuclear. Nothing’s alive, permanent winter, no sun, no green, just cold and and dark. A guy is wandering around with his daughter looking for food. The only thing that’s left are canned goods. So they spend their days foraging, scavenging, poking around the burned out buildings looking for cans. Everybody who’s left is doing the same, so there’s a lot of competition. It gets pretty violent at times.”

Ben looked sadly at his son. “Sounds cheery.”

Paul smiled. “The book’s not about despair, or at least it’s not supposed to be.”

“Then what’s it about?”

“It’s about how the absence of hope can itself become a presence, a force of affirmation. And that even in the darkest of times people can still make something out of their lives.”

Before his eyes his large, unattractive boy became more solid. “Not sure I understand,” Ben said.

“You’ll have to read the book.”

“I will. I promise. It sounds interesting”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Take care, okay?”

“Okay.”

IV.3

During the sad and tedious months of the Fall Ben would meet Bernie Olen in the lobby of WellBeing one evening a week. When the muscle-man was done lifting he'd sip his water and report on Degner's activities. Ben had been right: Bernie was an enthusiastic spy. He told Ben that he stayed late at work and tried to time his arrival and departure to coincide with Degner's. He even boasted that he had followed his boss home a few times, despite Ben's urging him not to do this. But Bernie had nothing to report, for Degner's doings were exactly as he had said them to be. He came to work early, he left late, and the only deviations from his routine were the one or two nights a week when he met a woman at the Green Room. Degner seemed to have a stable of women, for with the exception of being young and attractive they were almost always different. Bernie supposed they had been hired for the evening. Degner would meet them for dinner around 8:30 and leave with them promptly at 10.

Bernie described how Epochal was run with a brutal intensity. Everyone, from the receptionists to the scientists, was under the gun to produce. Degner prowled the halls, popped into labs unannounced, and even inspected the copy machines to see if they were being used for personal business. He was obsessed with the place being neat, and would often pick up scraps of paper he found on the floor. Everyone was scared of him. Bernie told one story that stuck with Ben.

A geeky young woman, short and thin, a research scientist in her late twenties, was eating lunch with a group of her colleagues in the cafeteria, an elegant and airy

room which served excellent food, when Degner approached her. Towering above her, he asked her in a loud voice why she had missed her deadline in getting him a lab report he had requested. The woman took herself to be a tough cookie and, wanting to show no weakness in front of her friends, had stood up to confront her boss. She reminded Degner that the experiment was complicated and that she couldn't get the report done as quickly as he had asked, and that she would get it to him as soon as it was done. Degner then asked her why she was having a leisurely lunch with colleagues when a deadline was looming. She began to falter. He told her that he himself never ate lunch in the cafeteria, but only at his desk, and that's where she should be right now. Her lips began to quiver and she muttered something about needing a break, about having a right to a decent lunch.

"You can have a decent lunch whenever you want," Degner told her. "But not on my time, not when you owe me work. The report is late and that's not the way we do business here. So eat your lunch elsewhere."

She didn't understand what he meant and so didn't move.

"Elsewhere, I said," he repeated loudly.

She still didn't understand.

"Pack your belongings and go. And here," he said as he reached into his pocket to pull out his wallet, "here's a few bucks. Go have a leisurely lunch at the Green Room. Just make sure your stuff is out of the lab by 5 p.m.. You're fired."

The young woman was so stunned that she didn't move. Degner then crouched down to bring his face down to her level, put his hands on his waist, and said to her in a mocking, teacherly voice, "We understand English, don't we?"

“Yes,” she rather stupidly said.

“Then, repeat after me: I have been fired, I have been fired. I have to pack my stuff and get the hell out of Michael Degner’s building right now. And if I don’t I will be forcibly removed.”

The woman went limp with defeat. She turned away and left the room. Degner looked at the crowd of Epochal workers who were staring at him, and he said exuberantly, “enjoy your lunch people! But then get back to work. And remember who you are. We’re making history here, people! We’re working out way down to the level of the molecule, and we know more about the human body than anyone in history ever has. There’s no stopping us, people! We’re going to get to the very bottom of disease, and when we do we’re going to make the world a better place. Even old age is not beyond our grasp, people, but only if we work our asses off. Big Pharma isn’t for the faint of heart. If you want to eat leisurely lunches when a lab report is due you’d better go elsewhere. So decide, people, decide: are you on the bus or off the bus?”

Bernie had to give Degner his due: Epochal was far and away the best equipped, best organized, the most productive shop he had ever seen, and it was infused, from top to bottom, with Degner’s passion. The scientists flew their protocols and the reports came through in almost assembly-line fashion. Drugs were hopping out of the lab and into pre-clinical and then Phase I testing faster than Bernie had thought possible. Degner was a tyrant but to Bernie’s amazement he actually seemed to believe what he was saying. His speeches about the drugs they were working on, and all the good they would do for people in need, were actually inspiring. When a team did good work, he praised them by

giving them the highest compliment he knew: they were, he said, cutting-edge. Epochal meds would save millions of lives.

Bernie had been put on a small team that was working on a modification of a med called Trazodone. Even though the drug was initially classified as an anti-depressant, Degner was convinced that if he tweaked it a little it could be marketed for insomnia. It carried no risk of addiction, and its half-life was long enough to keep patients asleep all night. The drug had gotten bashed in the journals for lacking high-quality research data and for having a nasty side: cardiac arrhythmia. Degner didn't believe the bad news because the drug had been around for over 25 years. If it had a glitch it would already have been taken off the market. Degner thought Trazodone was being trashed by researchers paid by Sepracor or Takeda, companies that made competing insomnia meds. Bernie had to admit that this was an interesting strategy and he admired the way Epochal was tackling it.

One day Bernie called Ben and his voice nearly trembled with excitement. He had become friendly with his supervisor, a guy named Rahul Patel, who had confided in him.

Back in California Degner had his sights set on Centurion. He calculated that if he could grab Rahul Patel, a leading cancer researcher who was developing a drug called Tumothen, his team would follow and Centurion would fold like a deck of cards. They'd merge with Epochal and the path to Cambridge, Massachusetts would be cleared. But Patel was standing in the way and none of Degner's enticements seemed able to budge him. He said that he didn't want to leave California, didn't want to leave Centurion, that he was not interested in making more money. And that he didn't want to

interrupt his son's training. The boy was a spelling champion and he was studying for the state finals. Patel wouldn't budge. So Degner invited him to his house. He insisted that he come.

Promptly at 9, Rahul Patel drove his Lexus SUV into the curving eighth of a mile gravel road that was the driveway to the Degner mansion.

Michael greeted him warmly, offered him a drink, which he declined. They sat in the living room and chatted innocuously for a few minutes, with Degner asking questions, mostly about Patel's son. And then Degner turned up the heat.

"Rahul, I'm not going to mince words with you. I need you. If you sign on, your company signs on. I can clear any obstacle that's standing in your way. Just name it. I'll hire anyone you want for your team. You bring your boys to my shop and we move the whole operation to Cambridge. I'll personally hire a spelling tutor for your son during the transition. You just tell me what you need, and you'll get it. Tumothen will be on the market within a year, I promise you, and you'll be booked solid with royalties for the rest of your life."

"If you don't mind me asking Dr. Degner, but how do you know so much about Tumothen?" Patel asked politely.

Degner smirked. "The valley is really just a village, Rahul. I hear things at the well."

"I'm sorry Dr. Degner, but my family is very happy in California. My children are doing well in school, and Meena likes her consulting job."

"I'll get her a better job in Cambridge. And if I can't do that, I'll hire her myself. Just tell me what you need, Rahul, and you've got it. On a silver platter."

“I don’t think so, Dr. Degner. You see, I’ve been working with Centurion for many years. They’ve been very good to me. And Dr. Urshanabi has been my mentor. I think I must follow his wishes. I must decline your kind invitation. And now, if you please, I shall go.”

When Rahul Patel got up to leave, Degner also stood up. He towered over the smaller man. “Patel, you’re going nowhere.” Degner barked, Patel was startled. But then Degner softened. “At least not until I’ve shown you around my house. You drove all the way out here, so let me make your visit worthwhile. Come over here,” he said as he put his hand on Patel’s shoulder. “I want to show you something.”

He turned Patel towards the hallway. On the wall was a glass case, filled with pistols and revolvers.

“These are my pride and joy, Rahul. I’ve been collecting for years. That one there,” he said pointing to a large revolver, “that’s a Colt 45 from the nineteenth century. And this one, it’s a beauty. Here, let me show you.”

He reached into his pocket to fish out a ring of keys, with one of which he opened the case. He caressed several guns before taking one out.

“It’s a Luger. The Germans actually called it a Pistolen-08. This one’s a 9 millimeter. Very popular in World War II, but it was actually developed earlier. This baby is from 1912. Eight shot magazine. Nice isn’t it?”

He held the gun straight out, in Patel’s direction, but since he was so much taller the pistol was pointed a considerable distance over his head. He pulled the trigger on the empty gun and it made a sharp, frightening click.

“You should take up target shooting, Rahul. It’s very relaxing. Would you like to hold it?”

“No, thank you Dr. Degner,” Patel said in a shaky voice. “I’ve got to go.”

“Yes you do. You’ve got to go now. But make me one promise, that’s all,” he said as he put the pistol back into its slot in the case, and locked the door. “That you’ll think about my offer. And think about it seriously. Decisions like this can have significant consequences, Rahul, for you, and for your family. For the world really. Tumothen can help a lot of suffering people, and Epochal is the shop that can bring it out most quickly. You owe it to your profession, to humanity itself, to come with us to Cambridge.”

“Yes, Doctor, I will think about it.”

The next day Rahul Patel, cancer researcher, joined up with Michael Degner, and just as he had predicted, Centurion Pharmaceuticals soon followed suit.

Bernie told this story with some enthusiasm, because, he reminded Ben, Degner had tried the same trick with him a few years ago.

IV.4

And there there was Fern. Zina had called Ben a couple of weeks after the memorial service. Fern, she said, had been in a stupor. She wasn't eating or talking, and she certainly wasn't taking care of Emma and Kate. Had it not been for Zina, the young woman reported huffily, they would have starved. The most worrisome sign was that Fern had stopped going to the gym. But Zina couldn't continue keeping such long hours, and she wasn't sure that Fern was even going to pay her. What, she pleaded to Ben, should she do?

Ben couldn't get the image of Fern's parents at the memorial service for Brian out of his mind, and had more than once been tempted to ask how long they had stayed in Boston, or whether she had communicated with them since they returned to California. But that was a can of worms he wasn't nearly ready to pry open. He had resolved never to be alone with Fern again, and so he insisted that Neal accompany him to the Mortensen apartment. Zina's report seemed accurate. Fern was half-asleep on the living-room couch, the two girls were playing around her but she was oblivious. Zina complained that Fern hadn't moved for hours.

Ben went up to her. "Fern?"

She looked up, and without interest said, "what?"

"How you feeling?"

"Fine."

"Really?"

She didn't respond.

“You can’t stay like this. You have to get up, start doing things. You’ve got to take care of your children.”

“I do?” she said listlessly.

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I’m sorry, you don’t have a choice.”

“Okay,” she said, but she didn’t get up from the couch.

Ben was stumped, and looked at Neal, asking for help. His partner responded. “Fern,” Neal said softly, “you gotta get moving. You children need you. I know it’s been a rough stretch, but it’s time to move forward. Zina’s worried about you. You gotta get on the move.”

When Neal approached her she looked up with interest, and some animation returned to her face. She reached up her hand, silently asking Neal to help her arise from the couch. He complied. She came up gracefully, but when she reached a standing position, she lost her balance slightly, or pretended to, and had to grasp hold of Neal’s shoulders with both her hands. The two danced awkwardly together for a split second, and Fern burst into a smile.

“Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” Neal said, slightly intoxicated by her fragrance. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. Really,” she said as she lingered for a moment in his arms.

Neal made sure she was steady on her feet, and then gently backed away from her.

“Thank you,” Fern said. “I’m better, now. I’ll be fine. Thank you,” she said, her smile radiating its warmth onto Neal.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then. We’ll come back to check on you now and then. And you call us if you need anything, okay?”

“Okee-dokee.”

Ben and Neal, true to their word, did check up on Fern every couple of weeks or so during the Fall of 2005. After their first visit, with the memorial service receding further behind her each day, she resumed her routine at the gym. She frequently asked about Winfred Bennett and seemed delighted that he was in jail and awaiting trial. This pained both detectives, neither of whom believed that Stringbean pulled the trigger, but they didn’t reveal their reactions to Fern.

The only time there was trouble was one day when she had exploded in rage.

“That creep, that traitor, he’s working for Michael!”

“Who?”

“Bernie Olen. He quit Elpigen, and started to work for Epochal.”

Of course, this was no news to the detectives, but they showed nothing.

“Where’d you hear that?” Neal asked.

“A woman at the gym. She works at Elpigen. She told me, and I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I nearly screamed.” Fern did look like a screamer, and ready to tear someone’s eyes out. The detectives had to exert all their self-control not to tell her why

Bernie had done this. Again Ben was tempted to ask her whether she knew about Bernie and Brian's affair, but again he repressed the urge.

"Let it go, Fern," Neal said. "He just had to move on. Don't blame him for that."

"Not blame him? Of course I blame him. He's a creep."

She paced back and forth in her spacious living-room, her eyes trained hard to the ground, never once looking up at the beautiful scene outside the enormous window of her home. Then she blurted out, "maybe he killed Brian! Did you ever consider that? Took his computer and his secret plans and sold them to Michael, and then got a great job at Epochal. That's it, that has to be it! I can't deal with this. I can't. You can't let him get away with it!"

"Get away with what?" Neal asked, genuinely perplexed.

"I just told you: with stealing Brian's secrets and selling them to Michael Degner. He killed Brian, I know he did."

"I thought you believed Winfred Bennett did it," Neal asked gently. "You know, the black kid locked up in jail, waiting to go on trial. That's what you've always told us."

"I changed my mind. I think Bernie did it. That's why he's working at Epochal now. Stole Brian's computer and sold it to Michael. Maybe he was jealous of Brian. Something like that. You can't trust him, believe me. Check him out. Please Neal, you have to check him out, you have to. Promise me that you will."

"We will Fern, I promise. We check out every possible lead."

"Good. Bernie's crazy, I'm telling you. All those muscles. Don't trust a word he says, that's my advice. He's not who you think he is, believe me. He takes steroids, you know."

“Steroids?” Neal asked.

“Yes, anabolic steroids. Helps him get bigger.”

“How do you know that?”

“A little geek like in such a big body? Come on, it’s obvious. Steroids make men bigger. Protein synthesis within the cells, tissue buildup, especially in muscles. That’s how Bernie got so big. And steroids makes men even more aggressive than they usually are. They can make men do crazy things.”

“So I’ve heard, Fern. But calm down. It’s just what Neal said. We’ll check Bernie out thoroughly. I promise. That’s our job, and we’ll do it. Your job is to get yourself better, take it easy, decide what you’re going to do next.”

“Don’t tell me my job! I don’t have a job: you do. And I’m expecting you to do it. Bernie Olen, Mr. Muscles! He’s not to be trusted, not to be trusted, I know it!”

Ben and Neal suffered her tirade in silence for another minute, but then extricated themselves from what was becoming a cauldron of anger. When they left her condo, they huddled together on a bench in Peters Park. It was cold but for a minute they sat still without saying a word.

Neal broke the ice: “Damn, maybe she’s on to something,” he said. “Maybe we’ve had it backwards from the beginning. Bernie was the jealous lover, not Degner. Brian wouldn’t leave Fern for him, and so he blew a gasket.”

“Never thought about it that way,” Ben had to admit.

“Maybe Bernie is juiced up on steroids, and they’ve gone to his head. ‘Roid rage’ is what they call it.”

“Doubtful.”

“Why? Because he’s gay? Gay guys can’t pull a trigger? A tad homophobic wouldn’t you say, Mr. Ben?”

“Can it, Neal,” Ben replied sharply. He stood up from the bench, and rubbed his hands together as he paced back and forth. He knew it would annoy his partner, but he lit a cigarette anyway. He immediately felt guilty, so he walked away from the bench. He took only a few puffs, and then threw it away and ambled back to Neal.

“Look, he’s a scientist; he understands how drugs work. I don’t think he’d go over the edge on steroids.”

“I don’t know, Ben. Getting strong can be an addiction. You want more and more, and if drugs pave the way, why not? I can see Bernie popping a few.”

“All right, all right” Ben said slowly. “But oh shit, if Bernie did it, we played right into his hands. We invited him to work for Degner, which is what he wanted to do anyway.”

“He sold Sweet Dreams to Epochal?” Neal asked. But then he answered his own question. “Why not? Double-motive, just like you said about Degner. Bernie took Brian’s computer. It had, what was it, the E.R.M.S. on it. Blue-prints of molecules or something.”

“E.S.M.R.,” Ben said patiently. “Efficient synthetic manufacturing route.”

“Yeah. That’s it. That’s motive.”

Ben nodded reluctantly.

“We look at everything Ben,” Neal said. “That’s our job.”

“Yup, our job. We’re the thin blue line between civilization and chaos,” he said sadly.

“Cut the crap. Bernie Olen’s on the list,” Neal said forcefully.

“Okay, partner,” Ben said slowly. “He’s on the list. We’ll keep an eye on him. But let’s not let him know. Keep him undercover, feeding us whatever information he comes up with.”

“But he’s probably been throwing us bad leads. Keeping us off the trail.”

“Yeah, but now we’ll know it when he does. And then we pick up the pattern.”

“Good luck.”

“Might need it.”

The two cops, thoroughly demoralized, stood up and went back to the car. The only silver lining, at least for Ben, was that he and Neal had just had what was, by his lights, a good conversation.

IV.5

A cold night in early December and Ben was in Bobby Doyle's apartment, drinking beer and talking about the McKinley basketball season about to begin. As usual, his friend was optimistic, and spoke glowingly about half-a-dozen kids he thought would be willing to make the commitment he demanded from his players. Ben marveled at Bobby's unflagging optimism, which renewed itself year after year regardless of the catastrophes he was forced to regularly witness.

Ben's cell phone rang. It was Bernie. He sounded excited, but Ben listened carefully for bullshit. Bernie explained, almost breathlessly, that he had decided to follow his boss home. But Degner hadn't gone home, nor had he gone to the Green Room. Instead, he had driven straight to the South End, parked in front of Fern's condo on Washington Street, and gone upstairs. Even though he was unsure of what was behind this information, Ben abruptly apologized to his friend, and nearly ran out to his car. He drove to the South End as fast he could.

Degner's silver BMW was parked illegally in front of the condo, and Ben parked his Volvo, legally, across the street. He waited for about an hour and as he was watching a cop ticketed the BMW. Almost immediately afterwards Degner left the building, and when he did Ben, without having planned to do so, jumped out of his own car

"Dr. Degner!" Ben called out.

Degner first looked surprised, then he hardened into a glare, but then he broke into a snarling smile. "Detective Kaplan? Fancy bumping into you. What are you doing here? Prowling the streets of Boston protecting innocent citizens from harm?"

He didn't look guilty, only mad.

"Something like that," Ben said evenly. "Actually, I drive by this building once in a while when I'm in the neighborhood. I'm still trying to get a feel for the crime scene. Maybe see something I've never seen before. Although I have to admit I didn't think it'd be you. That's where Brian was shot, you know," Ben said as he pointed to the park across the street.

"I know. But your investigation is long over, isn't it? You got this fellow Bennett behind bars and that's where he's going to stay."

"You're quite sure of that?" Ben asked as he inched closer to Degner.

"Quite."

"Don't be."

"Why's that?"

"Because you never know."

The two tall men looked at each other in silence.

"I think you're here hoping to catch a glimpse of the lovely Fern," Degner smirked.

Ben felt the hit but shrugged it off. "I come back to see if I can feel anything stirring. Ghosts speak."

He paused to gauge Degner's reaction. Nothing was detectable.

"I'm surprised Fern hasn't moved," Ben continued. "Living this close to where her husband was murdered must be difficult. It was in that dugout over there," he said as he pointed across the street.

"Yes, I know that too."

“How did you know that, Doctor?”

“I read, Detective, I read.” He paused. “You’re probably wondering why I’m here.”

“To see the lovely Fern, of course.”

Degner’s eyes closed tight when he laughed. “I came over to check up on her.”

“So how’s she doing?”

“Much better than you might think. She’s resilient. The only problem is Brian’s mother. She still calls her almost every night. She wants her to move back to California with the girls. Fern won’t even consider it.”

“Did she mention her own parents?” Ben immediately felt a stab of shame when he realized that he actually wanted this information from Degner.

“No, why do you ask?”

“No reason. So why did you visit Fern?”

“I already told you: trying to comfort an old friend.”

“An old friend, or an old girlfriend?”

“Both, I guess.” Degner smirked.

“Do you still have feelings for her, Doctor?”

“Of course I do. We were close once. She’s lost her husband. I feel for her.”

He lingered on this last phrase and was about to continue, but Ben interrupted him. “It was probably just around this time of night that Brian was murdered. We think the killer came out of the park, and forced Brian to go into the dugout.”

They looked around. There were cars driving by, and several people were walking through the park even on this cold night.

“A lot of people around,” Degner observed

“Brian might have been in a state of shock. He might have gone limp, become totally passive. That happens to people when they face the barrel of a gun. They stop thinking rationally. If he had made a fuss out here on the street the killer might have just let him go. He wouldn’t have shot him on the street. That’s what I’m guessing, at least.”

“Sounds like a good guess to me. Would you excuse me, Detective. I’m tired, and I’d like to get home.”

“How are the girls holding up? Emma and Kate?”

“Fern says they’re doing remarkably well. I think they’re too young to understand. Which is a blessing. I guess.”

“I guess,” Ben echoed.

“Have you been following me, by any chance, Detective?”

“Not a chance, Doctor.”

“Just a coincidence, then?”

“Yup.”

“Bullshit.”

Ben restrained his anger. “As I said, I sometimes drive around here, trying to get a better feel for the crime. Sometimes there’s a click, a piece of the puzzle fits in. Complicated process, solving a murder. It’s like a story that only has an ending. My job is to find the beginning and the middle. I guess that’s what it’s like to try to solve a scientific problem.”

“Maybe. Listen, Detective, I’ve really got to go. But if you’re going to follow me around, just let me know. I’ll send you an itinerary. It doesn’t vary too much. Work and home, with occasional visits to the Green Room in Kendall Square. Not much else.”

“Occasional visit to Fern as well?”

“Right. Have you ever eaten at the Green Room Detective?”

“Nope.”

“You should give it a try. Very good food, but a little pricey. Might be out of your range. Live music on Wednesdays. Do you like jazz Detective?”

“Not much.”

“Too bad. But the food is really quite good. Maybe I’ll see you there sometime.”

“Doubt it.”

Degner walked towards his car, and just as he was about to open the door, he turned back to Ben. “Do you have problems sleeping Detective?”

Ben felt as if he had just been hit in the stomach, and for a moment he didn’t know what to say. He made himself cough.

“Not really.”

“Bullshit. You can’t sleep. That’s why you’re out prowling the street for no good reason. Listen, have you tried our new med, Oneirion? It can’t do chronic, but it’s pretty good for short term stuff. Better than Ambien or Lunesta. Why don’t you try it for a week. Maybe it can get you back on track. There’s no reason you have to suffer, you know. You’re a smart man, but your IQ goes down measurably if you don’t get enough sleep. Why don’t you drop by the office, and I’ll give you some samples. At least give it a try Detective. It can only make you feel better.”

“Isn’t that illegal Doctor? You don’t have an M.D.. Are you allowed to dispense perscription drugs?”

“Guilty as charged, Detective, guilty as charged! At least ask your doctor about Oneirion. You’ll be surprised by the results.”

“I’m doing fine as I am,” Ben replied. “But thanks anyway,” he forced himself to say.

“My pleasure, Detective. That’s what my business is all about. Figuring out new ways to help people.”

“What a guy,” Ben said. Degner smirked and strode towards his car. Ben got back into his Volvo station wagon, and from there watched Degner discover the ticket on his windshield of his BMW and with palpable indifference stick it into his pocket, and then peel away quickly. When the silver car was out of sight, he turned on his own ignition. The radio was still tuned to WEEL, the Red Sox station, but with the season over all that remained was the standard talk-show nonsense which featured two guys trying to out-shout each other. Ben turned it off in disgust. He sat in the car with the engine idling but felt unable to shift the gears and get the car moving. The realization that Degner had seen through him made him feel ill. He rolled up the window to get some air. Breathing deeply he tried to concentrate. No matter how he analyzed the situation, no matter how hard he rationalized, there was no escaping the simple fact that Degner had scoped him out. He knew that Ben had been tailing him. And he knew Ben couldn’t sleep. He tried to talk himself out of feeling bad by reasoning that Degner could have just made an educated guess: most men Ben’s age had trouble sleeping. This didn’t make him feel any better. He turned the car off, got out without rolling up his window, and walked across the street

to the park. He walked over to the dugout, took a few steps into its dirt floor, and vomited on the very spot where Brian Mortensen had been murdered.

When he recovered, he pulled out his cell phone and called Fern.

“Did he bother you?”

“Who?”

“Michael Degner. I bumped into him just now on the street and he told me that he had been visiting you.”

Fern laughed merrily. “Don’t worry, Ben. I can take care of myself. He didn’t bother me. And what were you doing on my street?”

“Usual patrol. Did he put the moves on you?”

“Moves? Of course he did. But he didn’t get anywhere. He wasn’t any more trouble than usual, don’t worry.”

“Do you want me to come upstairs?”

“Of course.”

Ben became flustered. “No, I mean, do you need my help or anything?”

Fern laughed. “No, Ben. Thank you though. I do appreciate your concern.”

“Just part of my job.”

She chuckled.

IV.6

Fern was pole-dancing in a strip club. On one of her twirls she caught Ben's eye. He was sitting in the front row, and was staring at her with a hang-dog, mouth-gaping look. A group of drunken cops were with him, one of whom was dressed in a captain's uniform. But it wasn't O'Toole. It was Michael Degner.

On her next twirl around the pole Fern winked at him. Ben put his hands over his eyes in anguish. When Fern saw him like this, she immediately removed herself from the pole and tenderly approached him. But she never stopped dancing, gyrating gracefully to the thumping music. She was dancing still even after she had sat on Ben's lap. All the while she was smiling at him with a pitying, gentle look. He couldn't bring himself to look back at her, so he glanced instead at Captain Degner, who cast him an approving look, and then also winked.

He awoke, more aroused than he had been in months, and after glancing at his clock, which read 3:15, he muttered out loud to his empty room, "fuck, fuck, fuck." When he had returned to his apartment he hadn't even tried to get to sleep until after one, and he tossed and turned for an hour after that. A shitty hour, that's all he had gotten. She had wrecked the little bit of sleep that was coming to him that night. He deserved better, it didn't seem fair; he was only trying to help. He was tempted to call Bobby, but it was too late even for his friend.

As soon as he got out of bed, his arousal ended and he went to the kitchen. But he didn't feel like eating, for which he was grateful. He took a swig of seltzer. And he paced. Then he tried to stretch. Sleep was out of the question. He paced some more, his

heart beating. He was tempted to get back to his car, but decided against it. He walked back and forth in his small apartment, his legs twitching with energy. After a few minutes he settled into his living-room chair and picked up *Health Cares*. He had read it once and liked returning to it at random. It was funny and moving, and reminded Ben of himself. Harold Larson, the hero, hated modern medicine. He wanted to be like his grandfather, a tough old Iowa farmer who never took any drugs, who had no patience with the medical industrial complex. Ben thought he could recognize Harold, a professor of philosophy in a remote Iowa university and something of a crazy man...whose craziness sparkled with a germ of truth. He was not at all like the snotty assholes who had been his philosophy professors, and whose names he couldn't remember. They had continually yapped about meaningless nonsense when he was a student at Harvard, while Professor Larson actually talked about things that mattered to his students: love, friendship, what it means to have a body that will inevitably break down. The only problem was that Harold was losing his grip. The novel was set in 1993, when Hillary Clinton was promoting her health care reform plan on behalf of her husband, and getting viciously trashed by the Republicans for doing so. Harold had become obsessed with Hillary and health care, and convinced himself that if he could only talk to her in person he might be able to save her failing attempt to save America. He decided to walk from Iowa to Washington, D.C. in order to personally deliver his own health care reform plan to the First Lady. Harold knew his idea was absurd, but he couldn't stop himself. This is what Ben liked about him. He assumed the same was true for Fern, since she had given him her copy of the book months ago. After he returned it to her he had bought his own.

Ben read for a few minutes more and then gratefully felt his eyes fogging. He returned to bed and fell asleep almost immediately. He woke up just before 9, much later and feeling better than he could have dreamed possible. And, to cap it off, just a minute after he opened his eyes, his phone rang. Ben flipped open his cell.

“So? Why was he there?” Bernie’s voice was trembling. “Are they having an affair, is that it? Tell me, Detective!”

“Bernie,” Ben replied, “where are you?”

“I’m at home. I can’t go to work today. I’m having a panic attack.”

“Okay. Try to calm down.”

“Calm? No way. They were in it together. I’m sure of it. Maybe Fern convinced Degner to kill Brian. That’s gotta be it, Detective Kaplan, that’s gotta be it! The two of them. They’re in bed together and they did it together! Insidious bastards!”

“Bernie, there’s nothing to suggest that they were, or are, having an affair. Degner said that he was just visiting an old friend. And Fern confirmed that story.”

“You believe that bitch?” he said, venom dripping from his words.

Ben couldn’t answer that one honestly, so he didn’t reply.

“Don’t believe a word she says,” Bernie hissed. “She’s nasty from head to toe.” He paused. “You never told her about me and Brian, did you?”

“Nope. Never did. Never told anybody, except Neal.” And Ben wondered, not for the first time, whether he should have.

“Doesn’t matter to me, anymore. Now I’d like to rub it into her smarmy little face. I think I might tell her myself.”

“Up to you, Bernie, but I wouldn’t recommend it,” Ben said. “She’s not a happy camper, and you telling her that Brian was your squeeze would only make her more wretched than she already is.”

“Wretched? She’s sleeping with the big man, having the time of her life. They’re in bed together on this, Ben!”

For a good couple of minutes Ben listened to Bernie rant, deeply grateful that his call hadn’t interrupted his precious few hours of sleep. When the muscle-man finally tired out, Ben gave him one of his standard lines: “Bernie, I promise you that we will examine every possibility, every line, on this case. I’m checking Degner out, you know that, and you’re helping me do it. If he pulled the trigger, I’ll find out. Just try to stay calm and keep up the good work. Let me know if Degner does anything strange.”

Bernie snapped back into himself. “One thing to tell.”

“What?”

“Degner’s going to the Green Room tonight. I was in his office, giving him a lab report, but really just keeping my ears open for what that bastard was up to, and I heard him tell his secretary to make a reservation there at 8 p.m..”

“That’s good Bernie, that’s good. I’ll visit him there, don’t worry. I’ll keep an eye on him. You keep your distance, understand? From all of this.”

Bernie didn’t reply, responding only with what sounded like a series of rhythmic grunts.

Despite the cold, and the fact that he was late to the office, Ben was sitting on his stoop, trying to digest the night’s events and the tirade he had just received. His chest

was filled with a mass of thick anxiety, and so he lit a cigarette in the hopes of clearing it. The nicotine worked and suddenly he felt buoyant. So many possibilities, so many stories to concoct. All he had to do was figure out the one that conformed to reality. And that's what he had spent his adult life doing, what he was good at. He'd crack this bastard case open. For a moment of that he was sure. He didn't buy the Degner-Fern angle Bernie was peddling, or the Bernie-Degner angle Fern had in mind. But truth be told, except for a pure dose of Degner he had no angle of his own and so Ben sunk fast when he realized that he was in the same boat as those two poor saps: floating on a dead sea going nowhere. Crushing his cigarette, only half smoked, he glanced menacingly at President Sarmiento and said out loud, "you fuck with me one more time, and I'll crack your skull open!" Just as the words left his mouth, a middle-aged woman, who was walking a Golden Retriever, walked by. She had short gray hair, and was wearing jeans and a dark black sweater, and although she must have heard what he said, she didn't bother to look at him. Ben quickly looked into himself, searching for any semblance of shame, which he didn't find. Nonetheless, he waited until she was a good two blocks away to leave his stoop.

It was close to 10 when Ben arrived at the station. Sally, wedding ring firmly on her finger, greeted him cheerfully. He forced himself to ask about Tweed, and she said he was fine. Then, feigning pleasure, he continued with his usual game: "How's Cotton?"

"Fine."

"And Silk?"

"He's good. But stop it Ben! You're just making fun."

“No I’m not Sally. Just trying to figure out the textile industry.”

“You’re being mean Ben, so just stop it! They’re nice people. All of them. Even if they have funny names.”

“Funny? I don’t think Wool is a funny name. Spandex. Now, that would be funny.”

“You’re mean, Ben.”

“No I’m not. Street-hardened and crusty on the outside, but a heart of gold buried deep within, often hidden far from human purview.”

“Stop it. Get to work right now!”

“Will do, Sal. Say hi to Tweed for me. He’s a good kid.”

“Well, at least you’re right about that.”

He sipped at a cup of weak office coffee at his desk as he was waiting for Neal to return from whatever errand he was doing. Ben didn’t recognize the feeling in his stomach, but he was unable to sit still for very long. So he got up and began to wander around the station, chatting up the cops he knew, which was most of them. When he found himself in the basement and near Chloë’s office he decided to pay her a visit. The gnomish lady was standing, which was unusual.

“Hi sweetie,” Ben said.

She didn’t respond.

“What’s the matter?”

“Data-bases. Nothing but gangs. What a bore. You don’t have anything interesting for me, do you big man?”

“Wish I did.”

“You’re useless.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Self-pity. How lovely.”

“Just restless. I’ve got a big date tonight.”

She looked at him with contempt.

“Not with a woman. With a suspect.”

“Who?” Chloë asked with no bit of interest touching her voice.

“That guy you looked up a while back. Michael Degner, CEO of Epochal Pharmaceuticals.”

“Sounds like fun. You going to blow him?”

Ben wasn’t amused but he made himself laugh. “Not this time.”

“Wish I could come.”

“Wish you could too.”

“We could do great things together, big man.”

“We already have, dear, we already have.”

Ben’s next thought, which came to him as a revelation, was to invite Moira to lunch. She had once told him that she would say yes, and he believed her. He flipped open his cell but Moira was in court and wouldn’t be back until late afternoon. There was nowhere to go but outside, where it was clear and cool, and nothing to do but smoke. But his cigarette tasted harsh and he snuffed it out after just a few puffs.

Back at his desk Ben discovered that Neal had already left for Roxbury and the latest gang bang: a fourteen year old, dead on the street. His scribbled message said that

he could handle it alone. Ben took his partner at his word, although he wondered if his friend was trying to avoid him, and decided to call it a day.

He went outside and began to slowly pace back and forth on the sidewalk in front of the station. The movement made his legs feel surprisingly good, and because he didn't want to go back inside, he did something he hadn't done in years: take a walk. He walked through the Northeastern campus, and over to the Museum of Fine Arts. He stopped to gaze at the magnificent entrance, but decided against entering. After an hour he ended up in a coffee shop near Boston University. A huge cavernous place, filled with round tables, scattered books, dozens of students and loud music. He found a table next to the front window. He sat down with his double espresso and was reading the *Globe* when a street woman walked by. She peered through the window and looked inside the shop directly at Ben. She had pieces of white tissue stuck into her nostrils, which she removed just before she entered. She put them into the pocket of her filthy overcoat. Like many people on the street she was wearing several layers of clothing, all of them tattered. Her once white tennis shoes were torn. Carrying a half-dozen plastic bags filled with her worldly possessions she was limping badly, almost listing, unable to keep her body erect. Quite old, her face was ravaged, but it was still handsome even as she grimaced. She dumped the bags down on top of a table near Ben's, and then reached deep into her pockets and started pulling out crumpled clumps of tissue, among which were equally crumpled dollar bills. She extracted a few and worked her way, with difficulty, to the counter. All the while she kept up a steady stream of chatter, aimed at no one, but surprisingly coherent. About the cold weather, about the stupid war in Iraq and the man

who claimed to be President. Her conversation took a turn for the worse when she said, “Ghost riders in the sky. Well, they were there yesterday,” she said more than once.

She didn’t seem to understand how the coffee shop worked, and first went to the station where coffee was picked up, not ordered. The twenty-year boy old behind the counter politely directed her to the line at the cash register, where she ordered a small coffee with plenty of milk. Another twenty-year, this time a girl, explained that the milk and sugar were behind her and she should fix her coffee herself. She seemed to appreciate the advice, and thanked the young girl and began to walk away. Then she abruptly turned back to the counter and said, “what’s the cheapest cookie?”

The girl said it was the small shortbread, at 75 cents each.

“That’s expensive.”

The girl didn’t respond.

“Gimme two,” she said.

She limped back to her table with her coffee and cookies. She brushed her hair inside her scarf, and re-tied it, almost as if she cared about her appearance. She broke the cookies into pieces and dropped them into her coffee and began to slurp appreciatively.

A cadre of young male geeks, each carrying a metal cup, entered the shop for refills. Like a team of adolescent boys ready to start a game they rubbed shoulders with one another. When they passed the old woman one made some sort of remark and the rest laughed. Ben was ready to pounce upon them if they said anything to her, but they passed her by and she didn’t notice them.

“Hot coffee,” she said. “Very nice coffee. Maybe it’s the way it’s made. Better than Dunkin Donuts. Oh, that’s good. Getting warmed up. Clouds large and ominous. I

didn't know the economy hit rock bottom. Jobs leaving New England. They're all going west. Better watch out. If you wanna live like a millionaire, you'd better have a job."

She stood up abruptly and struggled back to the cash register. "Did you give me the right change?" she barked at the girl who was trying to ring up another customer.

"No, Ma'am," the girl responded thoughtfully. "You gave me the right amount. There was no change."

"Thanks, that's wonderful."

Ben was tempted to give her a few bills on his way out, but resisted. If she wanted money, he figured, she'd ask. For all he knew, she might be doing fine.

Later that afternoon he went to McKinley High School to watch Bobby run his first day of practice. There were two dozen boys, all black, most of them skinny, waiting around expectantly. Most were ready to jump out of their skin, eager to show the coach their moves. Bobby blew the whistle and spoke to them in his quiet monotone. And then he set up the drills. He wouldn't allow the boys to scrimmage or even shoot the ball. It was only run, dribble, and most of all, pass. He repeated the drills over and over, knowing full well that this would weed out the hot-shots, the kids whose sole objective was to wiggle their way to the basket. Only those who wanted to learn how to play the game properly would stick around. Ben guessed that the number of players would be cut in half by the next day.

He cornered Bobby after practice. The small man was, as always, glad to see him.

"I think I might be losing it, Bob."

"Can't lose something you never had."

“Nice,” he said. “Listen, I’m still deep into Michael Degner. I saw him last night near Fern’s. I don’t know what he’s up to, but I don’t like the smell of any of it. He’s under my skin, Bob, way under, and I’m not sure I’m handling it that well. The guy’s smart. He might be getting the better of me. And it’s starting to drive me...a little crazy.”

“As long as it’s just a little, you’ll be fine.”

“Thanks a lot. You’re a real comfort.”

“A little madness is good for the soul. Remember what old Plato had to say. Divine madness is the real deal. You need it to be a philosopher.”

“I don’t want to be a philosopher. Just a college drop-out cop who gets the bad guy.”

“Aw, are we feeling sorry for ourselves?”

“Fuck you, Bob. I’m being eaten up by anger at this asshole. I can’t shake it. I’m afraid I might lose it.”

Bobby shifted gears. “You won’t lose it. You’re angry for a reason. You’re trying to help Stringbean out, I know that, and I’m grateful to you. You think this guy Degner did it, and from what you’ve told me you might even be right. He’s provoking you, playing with you. He wants you angry. So make sure you don’t give him what he wants.”

Ben looked slightly relieved. “I’ll try. But that doesn’t change the fact that I totally fucked up this investigation. I’ve got nothing on Degner, nothing at all. He hired Stringbean to harrass Brian, but I can’t prove a thing in court. After that, all I’ve got is a few random story-lines, and my hunches. And they’re not worth a damn.”

“You’ve had some good hunches in your day. Alfred Garussi for one.”

“My claim to fame.”

“You’ve done it more than once.”

“Can’t always be wrong.”

“Sometimes right.”

“Sometimes. Not good enough. Bad guys on the loose.”

“Everywhere.”

“What if String did it?” Ben asked tentatively.

“He didn’t.”

“You sure?”

“No.”

Ben grunted a sad little laugh.

IV.7

The Green Room wasn't green. And if you asked Ben what color it actually was, he wouldn't have been able to tell you. Blue, or turquoise, or aqua-marine? He had no idea. There were bits of green splashed here and there on the walls, and Ben wondered if these had inspired the restaurant's name. Or maybe it was the vegetables they served. Ben, who hadn't eaten a vegetable in quite some time, didn't know, and didn't care.

The restaurant was L-shaped and large, filled with bright metallic tables, and had an open kitchen whose grill was firing on all cylinders. Its whiff of tech-efficiency, cut with some cool, befitted its location near the MIT campus. The Green Room was as close as the Kendall Square crowd came to being fashionable. Big Pharma execs and computer wizards relaxed there after a hard day of peddling drugs or writing code.

It was a Wednesday in early December, a jazz night, and the place was packed. Every table was full, and the crowd was standing two or three thick at the long bar. A trio of piano, bass and sax were playing innocuously in front, but the din from the throngs in the restaurant almost completely drowned out the music.

With the effortless assertiveness that comes with being a very tall cop, Ben easily made his way to the bar, and as he did a woman got up to leave. He paused for a few seconds to make sure no one else was in line to take the seat, but the kids at the bar were coupled up or in groups, and there were no single drinkers around to compete for the stool.

The bartender was young and tech-stylish. His hair stood straight up and he was wearing a thin pair of metallic black glasses. Even though he was busy, he greeted Ben

with a studied warmth and efficiency, and the tone of his voice and his manner suggested he was, like everyone else in the joint, well educated. When Ben made it clear that he wasn't there for anything resembling conversation, but only for a Glenlivet, the bartender understood perfectly and served him one quickly. There was a single, large TV at the end of the bar, but it was showing highlights of the previous weekend's football games.

As soon as Ben sat down, the trio cranked up the volume and began playing a lively tune that Ben almost recognized. He was uncomfortable on the bar stool, which was designed, as was most of the world, for someone smaller than he. And the thick press of people around him made him even more uncomfortable. That they were mostly young and techish only made him feel worse than usual.

From his perch at the bar he couldn't spy Degner, even though he could see above the crowd. So he finished the drink, put a 10 dollar bill on the bar, and left his stool. He needed the bathroom, but instead of asking the bartender where it was he began to make his way through the maze of tables. As he was doing so, a short, plump man wearing a colorful sweater, whose glasses were dangling from a chain on his chest, bumped into him.

"Oh geez, I'm sorry about that," he said to Ben. With an exaggerated motion he put on his glasses, he looked up and saw how tall Ben was. "How's the air up there?" he stupidly asked and then giggled.

Ben glared at him without saying a word or moving a muscle in his face. The short man looked embarrassed and moved away quickly.

Ben made it to the bathroom. There was a small TV screen above the urinal and on it was a sports talk-show. Even the paper-towel dispenser was automated. When he

left he again navigated his way through the maze of tables, but he still didn't see Degner. There was only one corner of the restaurant, the very back portion of the L that ran perpendicular to the grill, that he couldn't see, so he turned there. Almost as soon as he had made the turn he saw him. Degner was sitting at a table. And with him was Holly Laurent. They were both laughing.

Ben stopped breathing. His eyes locked onto the table but he couldn't quite process what was staring him in the face. Michael Degner, his prey, a man he despised, was with the one woman who in recent years had touched him. He stood staring for a split second, but when he realized that neither Holly nor Degner had yet seen him, he abruptly reversed course and headed back to the bar. As he did so he bumped into someone sitting at a table. He didn't say he was sorry. He pushed his way through the throng at the bar. A few people looked at him and they were tempted to be annoyed, but when they factored in his height and the grimace on his face they checked their anger.

He hurried out of the restaurant and into the cold air of Kendall Square. He stood in the plaza in front of the Green Room, leaned over and put his hands on his knees, and tried to concentrate on his breathing. Beads of sweat had formed on his forehead, and his heart was pounding. He yanked a cigarette out and was preparing to light it when he realized that couldn't bear to be anywhere near the Green Room. So he began to walk, and in a few minutes, without intending to do so, he ended up at the Stata Center, in front of the same bench he and Neal had sat on a few months earlier. Even though he was cold, he felt better. His head was clearing and unlike the last time that Degner had spotted him he didn't feel like vomiting. Now all he felt was rage. Degner had been tailing him and

somehow had found out about him and Holly. He was being stalked by his prey, a Big Pharma CEO. His arms started to shake slightly, and so he lit the cigarette.

Smoking with only Frank Gehry for company, Ben's body began to relax. Amazing drug, nicotine. Not only did it stimulate the brain, but it also relaxed the muscles. With his mind a bit clearer, he realized that the game had changed. Degner was not a man to back down from a fight, and now he had struck back. He must have had someone follow him, someone who had seen him at the Marsh Hotel with Holly Laurent. A sentence formed in Ben's mind: Degner had taken his woman. Saying these words to himself he realized how absurd they were. Holly certainly wasn't his. If anything, he was hers; her client. And of these she had many. Envy should be out of the question, and if his reason could exert any force over his emotions, Ben told himself, he should calm down. But he couldn't. Degner had slapped him. He had made the reservation while Bernie was standing in his office, and did it loudly enough to make sure Bernie could hear. He must have known that Bernie would relay the information. Either that or he and Bernie were in cahoots and were together conspiring against him. Ben was being trounced by a ruthless man who knew how to fight back, to taunt him, to rub it in his face, a man who enjoyed the fight and so poured it on. Everything was shot. Stringbean was waiting to be tried, and he had nothing, nothing at all, on Michael Degner. In fact, Degner had things on him. Prostitution was illegal, after all, and so Degner could call Captain O'Toole if he wished.

The strangling discomfort Ben had been feeling in his chest and his head were gone, but the pain had moved into his stomach, which was cramping tightly. He was gripped by a realization he despised: he was powerless, incapable of doing a damn thing about a bad guy. Degner cared not a bit for other people. He stomped on them, oblivious

to their feelings, their lives. He was a technocrat, pure and simple. Supremely confident, oblivious to others, his father was a Nazi—even though Ben knew he wasn't—and he plowed forward. And Ben couldn't stop him, couldn't do a damn thing.

Ben pondered his own powerlessness. His inability to tolerate it was, he understood, what had destroyed him as a father. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't and never would be able to protect his children sufficiently. He couldn't make them safe from the viruses and bacteria, the falls and speeding cars and bullies and drugs that they had to face. When they were small he had felt such a deep ache of responsibility that his inability to protect them kept him awake at night. It was then, when his children were babies, that he had forgotten how to sleep. Afraid of his own vulnerability he had kept his sons, and his wife, at a distance. The only way he could cope with his love for them was to leave them.

Degner was taunting him, outsmarting him, seeing through him, and so Ben felt an impulse to rush back to the Green Room and shoot him dead on the spot. He felt for his gun but discovered it wasn't there. When he remembered that he had left it, yet again, on the bookcase in his apartment he felt a spasm of relief.

Ben stood up and gazed at the cascading shapes of the Stata Center. They seemed to be crying out, "look at me!" and so he turned his back on them. A building, he thought, should be simple and straightforward, just walls and a roof so that the people inside could do their work and not get wet when it rained. Such waste, Ben sighed. His father's refrain repeated itself in his head: "I hate this shitty life." He lit another cigarette.

Back in his apartment Ben's heart, still racing too loudly, kept him from falling asleep, and Michael Degner did not once leave his thoughts. He endlessly fantasized about ways of causing him pain. He imagined all sorts of subtleties—slow psychological torture, brilliant rhetorical denunciation, splashing graffiti on the walls of his building, calling him in the middle of the night just to wake him up—all designed to force him to own up to his own depravity. But these soon gave way to the basic: beating the shit out of him or blowing his brains out. Ben thought he'd enjoy the former: crushing his nose, bloodying his eye. Shooting him might be better, but of course that would only end the man's consciousness rather than inflict upon him the suffering he deserved. The thought that Degner could mock him with impunity nearly drove him mad. His stomach clenched, he couldn't stay in bed for more than a few minutes at a time, and when he snacked he ate his toast furiously.

Finally, around 3 in the morning, he gave up. His heavy body heaving with painful fatigue, he left the apartment and got into his car. He drove over to the South End to visit the crime scene once more, to be comforted by, or at least communicate with, its ghosts, to apologize to Brian for making such a mess of his investigation. He vaguely hoped that he would see Fern, although he knew she slept soundly, but he didn't know what he wanted from her. To be held in her arms? To be fucked madly in the way that Degner had hinted she could? Ben didn't know. When he got to Washington Street it was empty. He got out of the car, lit a cigarette and walked into the park. The Boston wind was brisk and cold and had chased all other living souls back into their nests.

Ben entered the dugout where Brian had been killed. Poor boy, Ben thought. Heart blown to bits. He felt like weeping but he didn't know how. He had let a heartless

man worm his way into his system. A man beneath him, who didn't care about human beings. A low-life had made Ben mad and clouded his brain with rage. Degner had taken something away from him. But what aggravated Ben so was that he had given Degner power over him. The miserable, convulsive rage he felt was his own fault, not Degner's. Ben had let Big Pharma get to him. But now, in a dark dugout, in a park, in a cold sleeping city, he vowed that he would do so no longer.

These thoughts, and the cigarette he had inhaled, had actually calmed him down. He was proud of himself, so he thought he should return home and try to stay in bed for a while.

When Ben opened the door to his apartment, he was greeted by a sudden wave of thick, aggressive fatigue which hit him squarely between the eyes and reached deep into his bones. Without even checking his computer for the latest bit of terrorist news, he took his clothes off, threw them carelessly onto his chair, and walked naked into the shower. He took a long hot one, hoping it would calm him down, which it seemed to do. He got into bed without bothering to open the book next to his pillow. He closed his eyes and almost instantly fell asleep. But when he woke up, an hour and a half later, he was wide awake. His stomach was furious, and he felt famished. He got up and wolfed down a couple of pieces of stale bread, which he washed down with some seltzer. He was pleased that when he returned to bed his body wanted to stay still; this meant he would fall asleep soon, and he did. But he woke up an hour later, again attacked by what felt like, but couldn't be, hunger-pangs. His stomach craved food; his system craved comfort. This time Ben had a non-fat lemon yogurt. He hoped the dairy would work some soporific magic on the madness of his stomach, but this time he couldn't get back to sleep. So he

went to the black leather couch in his tiny living room, which often felt nice for a nap. He took his top sheet and pillow with him, and stretched out his long and increasingly rigid frame. An hour later he woke up again, and was powerfully tempted to return to the kitchen. He was disgusted by himself, so this time he resisted. He returned to his own bed and began the process of twisting and turning. When he woke up an hour later, and saw the morning's light, he knew he had to start the day, even though he didn't feel up to the task. He felt bloated, ridiculous, and the last thing he wanted was food.

“Jesus,” Ben Kaplan thought, “are there really 50 million people like me who can't get enough sleep? No wonder these Big-Pharma cats kill each other to get the right pill on the market.”

IV.8

“Man, you look worse than usual today.” It was the nicest thing Neal had said to him in weeks.

“Thanks pal.”

“You okay?”

“I did some work last night,” Ben said.

“Come up with anything?”

“Everything bad. Degner’s on to Bernie, on to us, and we don’t have a thing on him. He’s throwing it back in our faces, Neal. In my face in particular. We’re going nowhere with Michael Degner, and I can’t think of any other way to play this game. We might be finished.”

“Finished? Stringbean’s going to fry for this? And he didn’t kill Brian.”

“Maybe he did.”

“What are you talking about Ben?” Neal exploded. “You’ve said from the beginning that the kid didn’t have it in him to do this. I was the one who thought he was the shooter, but you talked me out of that. And I’m glad you did. Don’t give up on him. He’s soft, that’s what you said.”

“Jail makes people hard. Maybe he’s a lot harder than we think.”

“Just another nigger who’s gone bad, is that your thought? Sucked into the violence of the streets, just like the rest of them?”

“Jesus, Neal.”

The past months and the long line of black kids shot to death for no good reason had taken their toll on Neal Simpson. But he softened. “Come on Ben, you’re just giving up on another black man, thinking he’s just another gangster, consigning him to the ranks of the lost. It’s easy to do that. Shoot, I do it myself sometimes. But we can’t let ourselves think that way.”

“I’m not thinking that way. You know I’ve been trying to nail Michael Degner for months because I don’t think that way.”

“I know,” Neal said apologetically.

“But the trail is turning cold, Neal. Degner’s got motive, sort of, but there’s nothing to tie him to the deed. It was his gun, and that’s big, but he reported it stolen years ago. We know he hired Stringbean to trail Brian, but he’ll deny that on the stand, and no jury’s gonna believe String. And this guy doesn’t blink, doesn’t crack an inch. He’s tough, he’s throwing it all back in my face.”

Ben was tempted to go into more detail and explain to Neal how thoroughly Degner had manipulated him.

“Bernie thinks Degner and Fern are in it together,” Ben said without a trace of conviction in his voice. Neal’s eyes, though, came alive and begged for more.

“He called me yesterday,” Ben continued. “The muscle-man has his own little theory worked out.”

“You buy it?”

“Got no cash. Can’t buy anything. And Fern thinks Degner and Bernie are in it together.” Ben’s face sank, and he rubbed his eyes hard with the palms of his hands. When he looked up, he said, “this is going nowhere. Stringbean’s the ticket.”

“Please, Ben, don’t give up on him. We can’t let Winfred Bennett take the rap for something he didn’t do. He’s not a bad kid.”

“He probably is a bad kid, Neal. Just not that bad.”

“One more try, Ben, one more try? Maybe Fern’s right and it’s Bernie. Maybe we leave Degner behind and chase muscle-man for a while.”

“Not yet. I can’t let go of the big guy. And remember, Bernie loved Brian. That much I could see with my own eyes.”

“Then go after Degner full-bore. Full frontal assault. Just threaten to beat the shit out of him? Make him crack.”

“And it’s through the crack that the light gets in? He’ll get me and you fired, that’s what’ll happen. And we’d probably end up with zip.”

“Do it anyway. This guy’s dirt. Plus, his father was a Nazi, remember?”

Ben looked at his friend’s unwrinkled face. Neal had put only a few years into the job, and they hadn’t yet extracted their due. He still believed that progress was only a matter of the will. Ben knew better; he knew that sometimes the world just gives out. But his friend didn’t want him to quit, and Ben was moved by the urgency of his plea. Neal had seen too many black kids lying dead on the street and he didn’t want Stringbean to join the parade.

“I think you should go into politics sooner rather than later Neal. Run for something, anything. I’ll vote for you.”

Neal smiled. “I might do just that.”

“Okay,” Ben said. “What do you recommend?”

“Come at him through Fern. We wire her up, get her to coax a confession out of Degner.”

Ben was stunned, and he didn't know if it was by the idea or the absurdity of it.

“Think she'd play?” Ben asked.

“She might,” Neal responded.

“She'd probably have to take him into her bed to get him to talk.”

“We put a bug in the bed. ”

“That's nasty. She wouldn't do that.”

“You're probably right. Still, something to think about it, isn't it? We gotta try something Ben. And if Bernie's right, and she's in it with Degner, we'd find out. We'd know from her reaction.”

Ben paused. Neal had pushed him to the limit. “All right. But let me go after Degner one more time by myself. This idea of yours is hard to swallow.”

“You'll do that?”

“Yes.”

“Your heart in it?”

“No heart left, amigo. But don't worry, I can work up a lather when it comes to Michael Degner. Like you said, his father was a Nazi.”

“A Nazi bastard, to be precise.”

“Right. But he wasn't, you know?”

“Doesn't bother me if you think he was as long as it gets you fired up. Go after him one more time, Ben. And if it doesn't work, we'll bug the bed?”

“Right,” Ben chuckled. He was embarrassed by both the phrase and the idea. “I’ll see Degner tonight.”

IV.9

After a morning spent staring blankly into space, Ben allowed himself a luxury that he usually didn't: a nap. For reasons unfathomable he almost never had trouble falling asleep in the afternoon. When he lay down in bed with the sun still shining his body felt spectacularly relaxed and he'd quickly plunge deeply into the world of dreams. He loved the feeling, but paid too great a price for it. It would typically take hours, and more than a few cigarettes and cups of coffee to wake himself fully back up, and then he'd have no inclination at all to go to bed at a reasonable hour. Still, on this day, when he had a night's mysterious work ahead of him, he decided to opt for a nap.

He returned to his apartment, took a hot shower, dried himself carefully, and lay down naked on top of his well-made bed. Sure enough, his legs were still, his back wasn't tingling, and his body told him that it was happy to be just where it was. He fell asleep almost immediately and even though he awoke slightly several times during the next hour and a half, each time he was able to peer down at his lost sleeping self, feel glad, and return to slumber. His dreams, if that is what they were, were but snatches: Fern, his ex-wife, dear souled Miriam, his son Paul, Edith from the Work, all appeared to him, as did an all too familiar scene: he was late for a meeting with Captain O'Toole and the higher brass, and no matter how hard he tried to run down the sidewalk in order to reach the station, he made no progress at all.

Ben woke around 4:30, took a cold shower, got dressed, and prepared to leave his apartment in order to visit his father. This time he did not forget his gun.

Arabella, the good-natured Haitian woman who worked the front desk at the Work, greeted him warmly when he arrived. “Your father not feeling so good today. He went back to bed and don’t want no dinner tonight.”

“Really?”

“Yah, really. I think he okay though. He looked good. I think he just tired. That’s what he said, anyway.”

“You think he’s awake now.”

“Probably not. I think he asleep.”

Ben was more relieved than worried. Even his father was awake he had no desire to see him, probably groggy, in his room. “Thanks Arabella. Listen, give me a buzz if he looks bad. I’ll call the doctor.”

“Will do, Mr. Kaplan, will do. He’s a good man, your father.”

“He is?”

“Well,” she laughed, “he complain a lot but he’s never mean to anybody here. Complain about the President a lot. But he always tell me to take classes, get an education. He’s a good man your father.”

Ben just smiled at her.

With hours to kill until Degner would leave the Epochal building Ben had no choice: Rusty’s. He bought a *Boston Globe* and a *New York Times* from the convenience store near the Work, and made his way to South Boston. Traffic was heavy, but he was in no rush. Rusty’s was, as usual, nearly filled with cops, but Ben sat alone at the counter over which he spread his newspapers. He ordered a bacon cheeseburger, which came with fries, and a large coke. Thinking he needed something else, he asked for a side of

cole slaw and an extra pickle. When he was done, he reluctantly took a walk around the dark promenade of Pleasure Bay, which was biting cold. But when he was done he felt okay, and finally fully awake from his nap.

At nine o'clock he was in the Volvo, smoking a cigarette, and waiting for Degner at the exit of the parking garage at Epochal Pharmaceuticals. When he saw the silver BMW he jumped out of his car and flagged it down. Degner opened the window, and smiled at him.

“Good evening, Detective Kaplan. Another coincidence, I assume. You just happened to be patrolling this neighborhood precisely at the moment when I’m leaving work. Delightful. Shall we get a drink?”

“Let’s do that, Doctor.”

“Green Room?”

“Of course.”

Degner pulled his car out of the garage and parked illegally on the street. When he got out, Ben said to him, “better be careful Doctor. You’ll get a ticket here. You might get towed.”

Degner sneered. “I’ll take my chances.”

“Car might even get vandalized. Cambridge has its tough neighborhoods, you know. Not everybody around here works for a pharmaceutical company or goes to MIT. Someone might do your car some serious harm.”

He laughed again. “As I said, I’ll take my chances. Plus, I can always dip into petty cash and buy another.”

They walked into the Green Room, which wasn't crowded. They sat at the bar, each of them draping their oversized legs uncomfortably over the stools. Both men ordered a scotch.

"No more pretense, Doctor. I have been trailing you. You were right about that. And that's because I think you killed Brian Mortensen. You have two motives: getting Fern back and derailing Sweet Dreams. You wanted Brian's computer, something important's on it, so you bumped him off. You're a twin motive man, plus it was your gun that fired the bullet, and that makes you a bona fide suspect. And you've been trailing me, I know that. So, let's cut out the middlemen and get this straight."

"Good idea. By the way, your friend Holly is excellent. A real professional."

Ben ignored the remark.

"I haven't enjoyed a session as much as that in some time. I'd be happy to share my list with you. I've got a few on it who can rival your friend."

"She's not my friend."

"Bullshit. You're a softy, Detective. You feel things for people."

"And you don't?"

"Not usually, no. I'm one of the guys who goes for the idea of humanity, but doesn't particularly care for individual human beings. That's why I'm in the business I'm in."

"You're a pig. You run a big pharmaceutical company."

"Oh Mr. Detective, Big Pharma isn't as bad as you think. We're a company that produces medications that help people."

"And makes you rich."

“And makes me rich. Very rich. I enjoy my money, believe me. But that’s not why I do what I do.”

“You like the power.”

“Of course. But I use my power for the good. Pharmaceuticals. Do you know what we’re going to be able to do in the near future? Unbelievable. We’ll even be able to treat your insomnia.”

“My insomnia isn’t so bad. I get enough sleep. I’m used to it. Isn’t that all we do in life, get used to things? And there’s just about nothing we can’t get used to. Wouldn’t you say?”

“Horseshit! Don’t think that way. Your IQ goes down for every hour you’re sleep deprived. You’re a smart man, Detective, but you could be a whole lot smarter.”

“You’ve got drugs that will make me smarter?”

“Yes. Sleep just’s the surface. We’ll get below sleep to brain recovery. Do you know why cells die? Because they’re ephanating. Do you know what that means? The cells decompose. Something tells them to do it but we don’t know what. But we’ll find out, and then we’ll turn it around. Eventually. And I want to be the guy who does that.”

“You’ll make us immortal?”

Degner chuckled. “First, I have to take care of sleep. Death’s next on the list.”

“Bernie helping you much?”

“Bernie? God no. He’s a pipsqueak. Not the worst scientist and a decent worker. But he doesn’t have any fire in that iron clad belly of his, so he’ll never be more than a cog in the wheel. He’s no Brian Mortensen, that’s for sure. Now, that would have been a

coup, getting Brian. Bernie's a second place prize. At best. And my guess is that he's been tipping you off about my whereabouts."

Ben strained hard to see if he could detect a lie in the man's eyes. He couldn't tell. "Good guess. Bernie misses his friend, and he's helping me look for his killer."

"Which as I keep telling you isn't me."

"Look, Degner, if you tail me again, I'm going to lock you up immediately. Impeding an investigation."

"Don't be silly," Degner laughed. "But if it bothers you so much, I'll stop."

"Why did you kill Brian?"

"Oh get off it, Detective. I had nothing to do with Brian's death. Do I look stupid to you?"

"No. But I know you wanted his computer and whatever was on it. And his wife."

Degner looked at Ben sympathetically. "Computer? Don't be silly. His wife? Depends what you mean. Do I want to fuck her? You bet. You wouldn't believe what that woman is like in bed. If you knew, you'd make a play for her yourself. She's a madwoman; the frenzy is incredible. And she's willing to do things you wouldn't believe. She'd leave your friend Holly gasping for breath, believe me. Fern devours men. So yes, I would like another crack at her. But, let's be serious now Detective; do you think she's worth that much to me? You think I'd risk all this"—he pointed to the crowded restaurant—"for Fern Tarkanian?"

"Did Bernie Olen give you Brian's computer?"

"What?"

“Did he pull the trigger on his friend and buy his way into your company? Did you pay him?”

Degner looked at Ben with complete contempt and didn't bother to respond.

“Are you having an affair with Fern?”

Same response, and the two men remained silent. Then Degner said quietly, “let's make a deal. You stop trailing me, and I'll stop trailing you. And I won't see Holly again.”

“I don't make deals.”

Degner laughed. “Okay. But, please, give me your cell phone number, and I'll just call you to inform you where I'm going. And I promise I won't see Holly again. Out of respect for your tender feelings for her.”

Ben stared at him, trying as hard as he could to bore through his eyes with his own. His temper was rising, building to a height he almost didn't recognize. He wanted to throttle this man who was as tall as he. He wanted to put his hands around his throat and feel his neck give way. He reached to his waist to make sure he had remembered to bring his Glock. He had.

“Stand up, Degner.”

Degner didn't budge.

“I said stand up.”

Degner flinched and looked down sheepishly to his drink for the briefest second. Once he had done so, both he and Ben knew who had won this battle. Degner stood up, and reached for his wallet.

“I pay,” Ben grunted.

Degner, beaten again, said nothing but withdrew his hand from his pocket.

Ben plunked down a twenty to the bar.

“We’re leaving.”

“I want to go home now.”

“Forget about it. You’re coming with me.”

“Where?”

“Move,” was all Ben said.

The two tall men walked outside the Green Room. The maze of concrete paths was deserted as Ben took Degner to the Stata Center. When Ben was sure they were alone he said to Degner, “Where’s your pistol?”

“Right pocket”

“Give it to me.”

“Why should I? I have a license to carry it with me. For protection. From assholes like you.”

“I’m going to take your pistol away, Doctor Degner. Raise your hands and put them on your head.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Degner blurted, his composure compromised for the first time. “You have no right to do this shit to me.”

Ben brought his face as close to Degner’s as he could while not touching it. “If you don’t do what I tell you, I’ll grab your right arm, and break it. The story will be that you were reaching for the pistol, and I was protecting myself. And you’ll be in lots of pain.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Try me.”

Again, Degner was beaten. He was used to intimidating people, not actually fighting them. And he wasn't used to people like Ben, who seemed to relish the prospect of a fight, of inflicting pain and perhaps even of receiving it.

Degner raised his arms, and put them on his head. Ben reached to the right pocket and removed the pistol. A .38. He put it in his own pocket.

“Now we talk. Where were you the night Brian was killed?”

“Working.”

“What time did you leave?”

“10, 10:30, don't remember. Just as I've told you and your buddies twenty times.”

“How did you know I was seeing Holly?”

“Hired a private detective. I won't do it again, I promise.”

“That's right, you won't. You know why?”

Degner didn't respond.

“Because if you touch her again I'll blow your brains out.”

Ben punished himself immediately after he said this. He took a deep breath and said, “Did you send Stringbean to kill Brian?”

“No. Just to scare him a little.”

“Why?”

“Thought maybe it would soften him up when I made another play for him.

Thought he might get a little freaked out about taking the train and then I could offer him a limo to take him to and from work. Not the best of ideas.”

“Do you know someone named Blinky Williams?”

“Who?”

“Blinky.”

“Don’t be crazy. Detective.”

“Are you having an affair with Fern?”

“I wish I were. Look, I’m telling you that I didn’t have anything to do with the death of Brian Mortensen. Am I heartbroken that he’s gone? Not particularly. But I didn’t get any pleasure from his death, and I certainly didn’t kill him. I’ve never killed anyone, Detective, and I don’t plan to start. My job is to save lives, not take them away. Please, can we stop this?”

The plaintive tone in Degner’s voice pulled Brian out of his trance. For a moment he couldn’t remember why he was standing in front of the Stata Center.

“Was your father a Nazi?”

Degner’s face softened and his voice dropped to nearly a whisper. “Why do you keep picking on him? He wasn’t a bad guy, my father, and he certainly wasn’t a Nazi. We weren’t close, but he wasn’t a bad guy. I wish you’d leave him alone.”

“Did he hate Jews?”

“Jews?” Degner seemed lost. “I don’t think we had any in our part of town. Greenberg, who owned the clothing store...that’s all I can remember.”

“Did he hate Greenberg?”

“No,” he continued, still in trance. “He didn’t like him, though. Thought he was pushy.”

“Fucking Nazi.”

“No, really, he wasn’t. Just a small town nobody. But not a bad guy. Honest businessman, a good American, fought in World War Two. He was no Nazi.”

“But why did he hate Greenberg? What’d Greenberg ever do to him?”

“Nothing,” Degner admitted.

“He met with Hitler and admired him. He liked the way the Nazis stacked their wood.”

“I read the story. It was strange, I admit, but, Jesus, give him a break, he was just a kid. He didn’t know any better. Just impressed by a big-shot in a uniform, that’s all. No one knew who Hitler really was in those days. Cut him some slack. My father wasn’t a bad guy. We weren’t close, but I do know that.”

Ben didn’t respond.

“Maybe he did hate Greenberg,” Degner said thoughtfully. “My father didn’t talk to me much. I really have no idea who he hated.”

Ben looked into his face, which, stripped of its mask, looked soft and weak and hurt. Ben said, “Let’s walk back to your building.”

The two tall men walked silently. Ben realized he had no more questions for Michael Degner. The links to Brian’s murder were there—the California gun that somehow appeared on the streets of Boston, hiring String, Fern, Sweet Dreams—and in his imagination he could connect the dots. But reality was, as usual, letting him down. He couldn’t back up his story, and certainly not in court.

When they reached Epochal Pharmaceuticals, Ben reached into his pocket and returned the pistol to Michael Degner. When he took back his gun the more familiar snarl returned to Degner’s face, and any bit of sympathy Ben had held for him dissipated.

“You made a considerable mistake tonight, Detective.”

“I doubt that, Doctor.”

“Trust me. I’m not the guy you want as your enemy.”

“You’re wrong about that. I’m delighted to have you as my enemy. In fact, I wouldn’t have it any other way. You know why? You disgust me. You’re a drug peddler who makes a fortune from other people’s suffering. Wave your magic wand and the pain will go away. And if you don’t pay up, then it will start to hurt again.”

“Sad, sad man. You’re spouting nonsense, Detective.” Degner sounded bored.

“If you had anything to do with Brian’s death, I’m going to find out.”

“Brave, brave man. Crusader for justice. Did it ever occur to you that you’re just barking up the wrong tree, that your investigation is going nowhere?”

Ben didn’t respond.

“A good scientist knows when to get off the train. Drop it, Detective, for your sake and mine.”

Ben was ashamed to admit that this might be good advice. He turned abruptly and walked away from Michael Degner.

IV.10

In his miniscule dream he was running after his son David, who was late for his plane. Ben was shouting at him, “did you remember your ticket?” When he awoke and calculated that he had slept for only forty minutes, he rubbed his eyes and wondered where his sleep had gone. Heavy dreamless sleep, the kind that you fall into and from which you arise feeling clean. What wrong had he done to deserve this?

At 1:30 he called his partner. “Did I wake you, Neal?”

“Nah,” his partner said, and Ben knew he was telling the truth. “I haven’t been sleeping much lately. In fact, I’m not even in bed right now. Alice’s asleep. I’m in the den.”

“What’re you doing?”

“Staring.”

Ben understood.

“He didn’t say a word, Neal. He didn’t crack, not even when I put a gun to his head.”

“You put a gun to his head?”

“Not exactly. But I almost pulled the trigger.”

“You almost pulled the trigger?”

“Not exactly.”

“Geez, Ben, what’s wrong with you?”

“You told me to try again, so that’s what I did. The guy wouldn’t budge.”

Both cops, each holding the phone to his ear, hoping to hear something, felt stupid and responsible.

Neal broke the silence. "I keep thinking of those two kids on Carter playground. I want to get rid of all the bastards, Ben, wipe the slate clean so decent people can get on with their lives. But instead, assholes walk the streets, and we can't do a damn thing about it."

"We do our part, Neal. We take small steps, clean up a little of the filth, and the world's a bit safer when we're done. We can't make it all go away."

"I want to make it all go away."

"And I just want poor Brian Mortensen to rest in peace. Set your sights lower."

"Nothing's right. You're a good cop, Ben. You gave it one more try with Degner, which is what I wanted you to do. But what about Mr. Muscles?"

"I don't know. Maybe Fern's on to something there. Maybe he was the jealous lover after all. Hard to imagine, though."

"Why? He's playing the game perfectly. Feeds you bits of worthless information, keeps you thinking that Degner's the one, keeps you off his trail. Sitting happy as a clam in his new office in Kendall Square. Why not?"

"I'm not biting. I threw that scenario at Degner, told him that I knew that Bernie Olen had sold him Brian's computer and bought his way into Epochal. The bastard looked shocked and nearly laughed in my face."

"Still," Neal pleaded, "maybe we should give Bernie a run for his money. Put the heat on him for a change. See if he squeals?"

"Maybe we should," Ben said without a trace of enthusiasm.

Neal lingered in silence for a moment more, and then said sadly, “Or maybe we do we have to let Stringbean take the rap on this one. Maybe he is the shooter, after all. I mean, geez, he did have the gun, even if it didn’t belong to him. And if he didn’t pull the trigger this time, he’ll pull it the next. Don’t you think?”

“I don’t know.” Ben’s voice was fading.

“Maybe you should take a vacation, Ben, get away from it all.”

“Where the hell would I go, Neal?”

“I don’t know. New York. See your kid.”

“My kid? He doesn’t like me much.”

“I don’t know. Go to Europe. Go to Israel, see your ancestors.”

Ben smiled sadly. Neal was a lovely man. Again Ben wondered how long he would last on this terrible job.

“You’re not cut out for this line of work, Neal.”

“Bullshit, Ben. I can be as big as an asshole as you.”

“No you can’t.”

“I take that as a personal challenge. So be ready, my man; we’ll go at it tomorrow, one-on-one. We’ll figure out what to do next.”

“Okay Neal. Thanks. Sorry I called so late.”

“I was awake.”

“Welcome to my world,” he said sadly.

At 2:15 he was desperate and so he called Moira. Fortunately, she too was awake. He fumbled with his words, but finally asked her if she’d like to go out with him. She

said yes but sounded surprised to learn that he meant right now. To his amazement, however, she said she'd be glad to make the trip from Cambridge and meet him at the Starlight Diner near South Station. There wouldn't be any traffic and it would only take a few minutes to get there both of them. After hanging up the phone, Ben nearly wept in gratitude.

There were only a half-dozen people occupying the counter and the tattered booths in the dismal joint, one of the precious few that was open twenty-four hours a day in Boston. Some were on breaks from their night-jobs, other didn't have homes. None looked cheerful.

"Thanks," he said to her as they settled into their booth.

"For what?"

"For meeting with me."

"I told you; if you ask me, I'll say yes. Although I didn't think it would take so long and that you'd ask me at 2 in the morning. But, anyway, you're welcome. Plus, I should be thanking you. You can be my bodyguard. This place looks dangerous."

Ben instinctively felt for his pistol, which wasn't there. "Danger's my middle name," he replied. "But think about it, if it wasn't for me you wouldn't even be here."

"That's true."

"Then you shouldn't thank me."

"Okay, I take it back. Still, it's better than being awake at home."

"Tell me about it."

"You really want to know?"

“Sure.”

Moira knew she shouldn't but she couldn't help looking at the clock: 3:15 a.m.. Another night she had cried herself through. She had sat at her desk trying to write the review essay of the four Balzac books but had gotten barely past the first sentence.

“Balzac, who lived 1799-1850, is widely considered to be one of the creators of realism in literature. This reputation is fully justified. The Human Comedy portrays the social world of Paris, with all its social stratifications, with great realism.” She was appalled by what she had written. She loved Balzac, and when she stood in front of her classes talking enthusiastically about him, her voice worked effortlessly and with pleasure, and she was interesting. But alone in her apartment, staring at her computer screen, she dried up and her voice disappeared. Just as had happened with her dissertation, when she sat down to write, she felt trapped and vulnerable, worthless and stupid. She wanted to write something beautiful, and she couldn't.

She looked again at the clock: 3:30. She had to teach in the morning, an intermediate French course. She was well prepared, but she'd be exhausted. Again. The book review had locked itself into her brain and wouldn't let her go. Its call on her time felt like a metronome, and it never stopped.

Moira didn't understand why she couldn't write, and at night, with the clock ticking relentlessly towards morning, the question haunted her and made her furious. She was smart, worked hard, loved her material; she was a good teacher who cared about her students; she was a nice person. But she knew the difference between good writing and bad, and she thought her own didn't measure up. She had been told dozens of times,

especially by her mentor, Alicia O'Connor, that academic writing didn't need to be beautiful. It had to be smart, effective and, most of all, it had to be done. Moira was unable to follow her teacher's good advice. It had taken her four years to write her dissertation, and by her lights it hadn't turned out well at all. She had passed all her exams, and had been praised by the members of her committee, especially by Alicia, but she didn't believe them. She thought her work was worthless because she had read beautiful French sentences, and knew that she could do no more than write a pedestrian English one herself.

Moira's clock was ticking. She didn't want to suffer any longer over the computer screen, alone in an apartment. She wanted a child, a husband, a daily life of diapers and breakfast and sweeping the floor. She wanted a man in her life with whom to partner in the making of a home. She didn't want to be a scholar. She liked teaching and she was good at it. But the Balzac review would never get done, and so she didn't have a chance at getting tenure.

She hadn't slept well in years. Her work, her writing, trailed her night and day and made her feel like a fraud. The feeling was always worst at night and usually left her, alone in bed, in tears. It didn't feel fair. She was smart, decent, and responsible. She didn't deserve this terrible solitude with only the menace of the computer screen for company.

4:00 a.m. and not a wink of sleep. She tried the progressive relaxation technique she had read about on the web. She focused on each of her tense muscles and tried to coax the energy out of them. But when she remembered that the alarm was set for 7, the

energy rushed back in, and all she could think about what that she'd be wretched the next day.

Ben, usually the best of listeners, felt uncomfortable and wanted to leave on the spot. He couldn't find the right words to say so, so he simply mumbled, "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"That's true."

"Stop it right now, Ben! You don't have to feel sorry for me, or worry about anything. Not with me. Just relax. Why did you call me? What's bothering you?"

He was stunned, and so he decided he'd take her advice. Taking a deep breath, he said, "I've screwed everything up, Moira. I've been chasing Michael Degner, harrassing him really. And I went too far. Now he could get me fired. I hate the bastard so much. Sorry, Moira, I just can't get him out of my mind. I even dream about him. When I sleep that is."

"Well, his father was a Nazi. You've got your reasons."

"His father was no Nazi," he said impatiently, as if she had just said something stupid. "Just a small-town Texas banker. An anti-semite, maybe, but doubt he ever went beyond that. Degner explained it to me and, I hate to say it, but I believe him."

"But you don't believe it when he tells you that he didn't kill Brian Mortensen?"

"I don't know what I believe anymore. I know that the gun that shot Brian belonged to him..."

"Used to belong to him," she interrupted. "It was stolen."

“Used to belong to him,” he dutifully replied. “I know that he hired Stringbean to hassle Brian, scare him into quitting Elpigen and coming over to Epochal. Degner wanted him, and was pressuring him. But he’s already told me he’ll deny that in court, and no one will believe Stringbean. But did Degner kill Brian and grab his computer? Man, if he did that then he’s got balls of steel....sorry Moira.”

She smiled understandingly and nodded her head.

“Anyway, the bastard doesn’t blink, and he seems to actually enjoy his conversations with me. He even, even,” Ben hesitated, searching for the right word, “taunts me. Throws it back in my face. Guilty guys don’t usually do that. He’s a world class bastard, but we can’t prove a thing. Sorry, Moira, I’m rambling.”

“I’ve heard worse. You’re just tired, Ben.”

“Very tired.”

“Me too.”

“I hate being tired. What would it be like to sleep six hours straight? Or even four. I can’t even imagine it anymore.”

“Me either. Remember being a kid? When I was 10 my father bought me a trampoline. We had a big backyard, and I’d spend hours and hours jumping with my friends. And at night I’d sleep a dreamless perfect sleep. Every inch of my body was exhausted. I never feel that anymore.”

“Me either.”

“Two insomniacs. Meeting at a diner. Talking murder and eating a burger.”

“You’re not eating a burger. I am.”

“True.”

“How bad is it?”

“The burger?”

“No, idiot, the case.”

“Very. This poor kid we locked up, Winfred Bennett, he’s pathetic and no angel, but no killer either. And he’s gonna take the fall for this one. Somebody set it up. Put the gun and the wallet and the cell phone on the street and invited him to take it, and the rap that went with it. Everything’s stacked against him. But he didn’t do it. Of that I’m sure.”

“How sure?”

“Pretty sure. Almost sure. Not sure enough. I don’t think he’s a killer. His grandmother says he isn’t and I believe her. He’s got a story which in its own weird way holds up.”

Moira looked frustrated. “I can’t help you with this. The wheels of justice are in motion. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s mine. I can’t nail the killer. I let him down.”

“Who?”

“Stringbean. Brian. My father.”

“Your father?”

“Sorry.”

“For what?”

“Nothing.”

“You let your father down?”

“He doesn’t like cops.”

“Who does?”

“You.”

“Only you.”

“What do I do next?”

“Come back to my place.”

“Really? I’m not sure I can do that.”

“Yes you can. Don’t worry. You’re not going to sleep with me. Just stay in my apartment. The couch is comfortable. And if neither of us can fall asleep we’ll watch a movie.”

“What movie?”

“I’ve got lots. I’ll let you pick.”

“But I only like action flicks.”

“Oh come on.”

“You’re kind.”

She smiled. And they left.

Moira's couch was as comfortable as advertised, and neither of them budged until 9 in the morning. After a few awkward moments, when they first encountered each other in her living room, they eased into a quiet celebration of their victory over the night with scrambled eggs and toast. Moira had a nice touch in the kitchen, and presented her modest breakfast with some care. She used cloth napkins and poured the orange juice into wine glasses. It was the first home-cooked breakfast Ben had eaten in memory, and it tasted wonderful. They chatted about the mayor's latest anti-violence campaign. Both were pessimistic about its prospects for success. They talked about the war in Iraq. Both were contemptuous of George Bush but for different reasons. Ben tried as hard as he could to agree with Moira without lying, and was pleasantly surprised that he could do so. When they got to the subject of terrorism, Ben said nothing about his brilliant idea of killing the bombers' mothers. As they left Moira's Cambridge apartment, she headed for Bullfinch Street and he for the Police Station, they made a plan to meet for dinner.

Sitting at their desks, drinking coffee, Ben and Neal discussed what was left of their strategy.

"So I guess this means that we move to Plan B," Ben said. "We give Fern a try. See if she'll wear a wire and coax it out of Degner?"

"Why bother?" Neal replied sadly. "It sounds like you're telling me that he didn't do it. If he didn't crack when you poked your gun at him, then why would he spill the

beans any other time? Even in bed with Fern. I mean, geez, why would he tell Brian's wife that he killed her husband?"

Ben wasn't sure he even cared about the case any more, but he certainly did care about his friend and he didn't want Neal to think he had given up. "To get her back. I think she's got a rough streak in her. Degner might think she likes hearing about it. Might think she'll be impressed with how tough he is."

"That's sick, Ben."

"I know. But I think there is sickness deep down. In both of them."

"So you think he'll brag about popping her husband while he's in bed with her?"

"He'll think it excites her."

"Will it?"

"It might. She didn't care much for Brian."

"This is crazy, Ben. Let's drop it right here, right now, before we either make fools of ourselves or get into some serious trouble."

"No. Let's at least ask Fern. It'll be worth it just to see her reaction."

"Why?"

"A piece of the puzzle, a part of the whole. Gotta finish the story one way or the other. Even if it doesn't have the right ending. Just go forward, that's all we do."

"Do the best we can with what we've got?"

"About right."

"Even if it's not enough?"

"Yup."

Neal fell silent. Ben was impressed with the absurdity of their plan. If they were lucky, the lovely Fern would say no on the spot, kick them out of her apartment, and then they'd finally be done with this sorry, misshapen case. He had no idea what would happen if she said yes, and he didn't really want to find out. Ben was accustomed to pursuing an absurd train of thought which promised nothing—he had, after all, studied some philosophy in college—but it was a new experience for Neal.

“Look,” Ben said, “let's say Fern agrees; let's say she's excited about wearing a wire. And then Degner doesn't say a word to her about shooting Brian. At least we know we're done, once and for all. And we can say good-bye to Brian Mortensen.”

“And send Stringbean to jail for life.”

Ben eyes dropped and for a moment he stared unhappily at his poor, pathetic shoes. When he lifted them and looked at this partner he said, “but at least we'll get some sleep.”

“I don't know about the sleep.” Neal replied. “I think I picked up the germ from you.”

“You'll get used to it.”

“God help me.”

“Amen. Anyway, what do you say? We ask Fern if we can bug her apartment. She wears a wire or we put a bug in her bedroom.”

“Okay. But this is some crazy shit.”

Ben's cell phone interrupted their conversation: it was Bernie Olen. He wanted to know what, if anything, Ben had turned up on Degner; wanted to know if his tips were bearing any fruit. The muscle-man sounded disoriented so Ben stiffened, listened hard

for the sound of deception in Bernie's voice. He decided to prod him a bit. He glanced at Neal, and turned the speaker of his phone on.

"Bernie, I'm trying to figure out what's going on here, get things a little clearer. So tell me something."

"Sure, Ben, ask me anything."

"Did you want Brian to leave Fern?"

The muscle-man did not respond.

"Bernie! Simple question: did you want Brian to leave his marriage?"

"Why are you asking me this, after all this time? I told you, didn't I, that I thought he would leave Fern eventually. But I, I had mixed feelings about that."

"Why?"

"I told you, didn't I? I like being on my own."

"Going to the gym any time you want?"

"Yes. That was it, that was what I said. "

"But living with Brian, that would have been sweet, wouldn't it?"

"Living with him? I don't know. I lived with someone once. It ended up being rather painful."

"Bernie, be straight with me now."

"Gee whiz, Ben, I've always been straight with you."

"Not true. Remember that you lied to me the first time we spoke. You didn't tell me that Brian was your lover and had been at your house that night. Remember that Bernie?"

“I suppose so,” he replied quietly. “But that’s when I was in a state of shock. That was the day Brian died.”

“But you know what happens when someone lies, even once? It’s a precedent. Trust is broken. Maybe you’re lying to me right now.”

“Ben, why are you saying these awful things?” The muscle-man sounded genuinely pained.

“I’m sorry, Bernie, really I am. Just doing my job. Trying to figure out what’s going on. So, tell me one more time. Tell me what happened that night.”

“Damn it, Ben, all I do is try to forget that night. Not re-live it.”

“One last time, Bernie.”

“Brian and I came home from work. We went to my place.” Bernie’s voice trailed off. “Sometimes, sometimes at night, when we were alone together, we’d send each other emails. Sometimes, we’d send pictures. Or our favorite little videos. It was a kind of fun we had. It was arousing.”

“You did this even when you were in the same room?” Ben glanced at Neal, who had a look of disgust on his face.

“Yes,” Bernie said sheepishly. “It was nice, and it got us going.”

“And that’s what you did that night? Send emails to each other?”

“No, we couldn’t. My Internet connection was on the blink. Stupid NetCom. Server goes down a lot.”

“So no foreplay that night?”

“No. None at all. So we just held each other for a little while, and then Brian called Fern and walked home.”

“And that was the last time you saw him?”

“The very last time. Why are you asking me these stupid questions, Ben?”

“No good reason, Bernie. I just keep trying to write this story, and it doesn’t add up.”

“But I thought you had your story: Degner hired that boy to kill Brian, took his computer, and cleared the path to Fern’s doorstep. That’s your story, isn’t it? And I’ve been trying to help you prove it.”

“Yes you have, Bernie.”

“Yes I have, yes I have. I’m always trying to help. Yes, I am. But I guess I haven’t accomplished much, have I?”

“That’s okay, Bernie, you’re doing your best. Listen, go the gym now and lift some weights, okay?”

“Okay, Ben” Bernie replied, some vitality entering his voice. “I’ll give it the old college try. Yes I will.”

Ben flipped the cell closed. He and Neal fell silent for a moment, until Ben said, “poor guy is whigging out.”

“Poor guy?” Neal replied. “That’s some weird shit those two were up to. Sending emails to each other when they were in bed together.”

“I hear you, partner,” Ben said.

“So what do you think? Good old plan B. Visit Fern, and see if she’ll wire up and court the affections of Doctor D. But we may be just a couple of losers on this one, Ben?”

“Yup. Shitass cops, that’s what we are. Or at least me.”

The cops returned to Neal's car and began the familiar trek to the South End. This time the silence between them was comfortable, as both men were coming to the realization that this sorry episode was coming, however unhappily, to an end.

"Guess I should call the lovely Fern before we get there, don't you think?" Ben asked.

"Guess so."

Ben flipped open his cell. Fern was home and, as usual, would be glad if they stopped by. Ben sighed. He couldn't now imagine anything worse than asking Fern to wear a wire and try to ensare Michael Degner in her web. But there didn't seem to be any way out.

Neal interrupted his dismal thoughts. "I can't get over it, Ben. Bernie and Brian emailing each other before having sex."

Ben almost smiled. "Some sort of cyber-foreplay. Hell, these bastards probably don't even like body friction. Probably get their rocks off checking each other out on the Internet."

"Why don't you say 'fucking Internet' Ben? That would sound right coming from you."

"Okay then," Ben replied agreeably. "The boys were trying to get hot on the night Brian was murdered, but Bernie's fucking Internet connection was fucking broken so the poor saps did no fucking on Brian's last day on earth."

"No Internet connection?"

"What?"

“Didn’t Bernie say that he had no Internet connection that night?” Neal asked.

“Yes.”

“Then how did he hear about Brian’s murder in the morning?” Neal said excitedly. “That’s what they all said: Bernie, Casper, Degner. They read about it on the Internet. But Bernie couldn’t access it. How’d he find out that Brian was dead? That’s why he didn’t come into work: he knew.”

Ben stared at Neal in silence, and then said, “Jesus, Neal. You did it.”

IV.12

The cops flew over to Bernie's condo and arrived just as the muscle-man was leaving for the gym.

"Bernie!" Neal yelled.

His dull eyes turned their way. "Oh, hi," his weak voice trailing.

"Where you off to, partner?" Neal barked as he jumped out of the car.

"Going to lift. Trying to feel better."

"Put your hands on your head and don't move," Neal yelled.

"What?" Bernie replied feebly.

"You heard me, asshole," Neal yelled again, this time drawing his gun.

Bernie lethargically did as he was ordered.

"Cuff him, Ben," Neal ordered his partner. Ben did as told.

"You shot him, Bernie, didn't you? You wanted him to leave Fern, but he wouldn't. If you couldn't have him, neither would she. Am I right?"

"Sort of," Bernie sniffled.

"What happened that night?" Ben asked gently.

"Well, we hadn't had sex."

"Because you couldn't get started with your emails?" Ben asked.

"Yes, that's right." Bernie nearly smiled. "So I suggested we go to a café, one with free WIFI, and we could do it there. It was a game we needed to play. But he said he had to go home. He said he needed to see his children in the morning."

“And that made you mad?”

“Yes. Frustrated. He didn’t even like his children. It was just this weird commitment he had made and wouldn’t give up.”

“So you offered to walk home with him?” Neal asked.

“Yes. That’s right. I offered to walk home with him.”

“And you brought the gun. The one you stole from Michael Degner in California?”

“Yes.” All of Bernie’s muscles seemed to slacken at once, and for a second it was possible to see an overgrown, soft man lurking inside the hardened shell. “Yes,” he repeated. “I stole the gun. He made me so mad when he pointed it at me. And I knew Carlos.”

“Carlos?”

“His gardner. A sweet boy. Used to go to a bar I liked.”

“So Carlos let you in and you took the gun.”

“Thought it was more of a prank than anything else. But I kept it. Don’t know why.”

“And you took it with you when you walked Brian home?”

“Yes,” he said softly.

“Then what?” Ben asked.

“When Brian said good-night to me, he wouldn’t even give me a kiss. He was so afraid Fern would find out. That made me really mad. I guess I just decided that I had enough. That’s what I told him, anyway. I said he had to make a choice: Fern or me. He

said he couldn't leave Fern, couldn't leave those silly little girls. Said it would make his parents too mad at him."

"How'd you get him into the park?" Neal asked.

"Turned on the charm and convinced him that we could at least have a kiss in the dugout."

"Quite a kiss. You shot him in the chest?"

"Yes. I did. It was like being in a trance, a crazy trance. I didn't know what I was doing. Didn't realize I had shot him. Then, it was like I was out of my body, and I was looking at myself holding a gun, and looking at Brian and he was lying on the floor of the dugout, and he wasn't moving, and I knew, I knew, I had done it to him but honest to God I couldn't remember doing it. And I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry."

"Was it the drugs that made you do it?" Ben asked contemptuously.

Bernie smiled sadly again. "Who knows what made me do it? Testosterone, Ambien, Zoloft, Amphetamines. Not me."

"But it was you."

"Yes, it was me. I was just so tired of him leaving, of not having him there beside me, in my bed, in my life. It took me years to recover after Bruce died. But I was finally ready for a real relationship. I needed Brian, and you know what? He needed me even more. But he couldn't see that. He was a very confused person."

"So you killed him?"

"Yes, I did. But I didn't mean to. The gun just went off. I'm so sorry, so very sorry." Bernie did not sound convincing.

“Why did you call the office and tell Casper that you read about the murder on the Internet? Your connection was down, wasn’t it?” Neal asked.

Bernie looked interested. “I figured that the news was already circulating, or if it wasn’t it would be soon. I just couldn’t go to work, so that’s what I said. I was too sad.”

“Where’s Brian’s computer?”

“Under my pillow. I still like looking at the pictures.”

“So the computer keeps you company?”

“Yes.”

“And was there any business stuff on that computer?” Ben asked.

“No, of course not. Sweet Dreams was a crazy fantasy. It was nowhere near ready. Nowhere near nothing, really. But we let Brian play with it because with his mind you never knew when he’d come up with something.”

“And you left the wallet and the gun and the cell phone stacked up on the sidewalk? And poor Winfred Bennett picked it all up, and you were going to let him take the rap?” Neal was angry.

“I’m very sorry,” Bernie said.

“No you’re not,” Neal snapped.

“You’re right, I’m not. I’m not anything any more. I’m just a mess.”

The patrol car pulled up and two uniforms took a hand-cuffed Bernie Olen away.

The next day, at 6:30 in the morning Ben was already awake, but the ring of the telephone still shocked him. Arabella from the front desk at the Work was on the line. She told him that Abe had fallen during the night and hadn't been able to get up. An aide had found him in the morning and the ambulance had been called immediately. He had probably just arrived at Beth Israel's emergency room.

Ben took a shower, which, for once, was unaccompanied by a song, got dressed as quickly as he could, and was already driving towards Beth Israel when he realized that he had left his gun in the apartment. He shook his head in bemused amazement at himself but was not tempted to go back and get it. In a few minutes, he had reached the hospital. He was treated politely and directed to his father's bed, one of dozens, separated only by curtains, in the large and crowded emergency room. His father was hooked up to various monitoring devices, and was surrounded by two nurses and a doctor. The doctor, who seemed to be but a boy, turned to Ben.

"Mr. Kaplan?"

"Yes."

"Hi. I'm Doctor Hsu. We think your father had a heart attack. He fell during the night, and couldn't get up. He probably passed out. We'll be sending him to the cardiology unit in a couple of hours. He also has a touch of pneumonia."

"He looked okay yesterday."

"Was he tired?"

Ben struggled to remember. During the past couple of weeks Abe had seemed more calm and gentle than usual. Perhaps what Ben took to be emotional softening was no more than bacteria sapping his strength. So he said to Doctor Hsu, “Maybe a little.”

Ben turned to his father, who was oblivious to his surroundings. “How you feeling, Pop?”

“Boitchik. Where am I?”

“You’re in the hospital, Pop.”

“Hospital? What hospital?”

“Beth Israel.”

“Why?”

“You fell during the night.”

“Yeah, so what? My legs gave out. I couldn’t get up.”

“What’d you do on the floor?”

“Went back to sleep.”

“The doctor says you had a heart attack.”

“A heart attack?” Abe paused to think. “I didn’t have no heart attack.”

Ben noticed that the doctor smiled condescendingly when Abe said this.

“Doctors want to check you out.”

Abe looked annoyed. “Tell them they’re wasting their time. Stupid bastards.”

“They just want to make sure you’re okay. That’s all. They’re just trying to help.”

“Call, call,” he faltered. “Call your mother and tell her I’ll be home late from work.”

“You mean Edith?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay I’ll call her and tell her you’ll be late.”

“Late for what?”

“Breakfast.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s about seven. I’ll call Edith right away. I gotta go to work now, Pop. I’ll come back as soon as I can. The doctors are going to take good care of you.”

“Okay,” Abe said. And then he asked, “where am I?”

“The hospital.”

“Hospital?”

“Doctors think you had a heart attack.”

“I didn’t have no heart attack. I wanna go home. Tell your mother to wait.”

“Okay Pop.”

“What time is it?”

“About seven.”

“Damn. I missed dinner.”

Ben was smoking in the cold, clear air outside of Beth Israel Hospital, and he felt an almost unrecognizable calm descend upon him. A heart attack had never been in the cards. Abe was a *starker*, a tough guy who looks out for those more vulnerable, and only his legs and his failing memory gave him problems. Ben realized that he had never once imagined his father dying. Or dead. Even though he didn’t want to, he flipped open his

cell phone and was about to call his brother, but he stopped himself when he realized how early it was in California. Micky would surely be asleep.

The nicotine and the backdrop of an imposing Boston hospital inspired Ben to make a resolution. He'd try to be nicer to his brother. He finished his smoke but didn't head back to the parking deck and his car. Instead, he walked to Longwood Avenue and then towards the cluster of trees that flanked the Muddy River. The Emerald Necklace they called it: a series of green parks designed by Frederic Law Olmsted that was meant to ring the entire city of Boston and offer its urban residents a sniff of fresh air. Of course, the automobile and its highways had sliced it into shreds, and invasive weeds had ballooned on both shores of the river, but a small piece was still pleasantly intact near the hospital, and to it Ben walked slowly.

He strolled along the path, careful not to fall on the slippery pavement. The river, usually motionless, thick and a slimey dark green, was now crusted with snow and ice, and so almost looked pretty. Ben was in no hurry. Reluctantly he started to think about what Bobby and Moira had asked him do: apologize to Michael Degner. This was both in his professional self-interest, they explained, but more important—especially to Bob—good for his tired soul as well. He had hounded the man mercilessly for months, and the guy was, in his own way, clean. Ben grimaced when he thought about the task that lay ahead of him, but smiled when he thought of his two friends. Two friends. Not too bad. Not for a guy like him. And when he added Neal, the number came to three.

Ben reached into his coat pocket to pull out his box of cigarettes, but decided against it. Instead, he made his second resolution of the day: he'd call Epochal

Pharmaceuticals and make an appointment with the big man. He took several deep breaths of nicotine-free air and turned back towards Beth Israel and his car.

The old Volvo gasped like an asthmatic when he started it and lurched like an epileptic when he began to drive, and only after a couple of blocks did it ease into an almost smooth drive. Ben made his third resolution of the morning: get rid of the aged beast and buy something new, small and Japanese.

Ben drove to Rusty's and had his usual breakfast. Rich in cholesterol, the three eggs, buttered toast and double order of bacon tasted delicious. He lingered over the newspaper, and read the latest news on the Boston Celtics with interest. When he was done he was tempted to walk the promenade to Castle Island. But his legs didn't feel up to it. Plus, he had to admit that he was just stalling. So he got up slowly and walked outdoors. Even though the cold bit his uncovered face and tightened his hands, he sat on a bench that faced the bay and called Epochal. To his disappointment the receptionist, after having buzzed her boss, said he was welcome to come over right now. Ben was tempted to make an excuse, but forced himself not to. With grim resolve he got back into his car and headed towards Cambridge.

The Charles River was skimmed with ice and lined with snow, and the cars on Memorial Drive were exhaling clouds of mist and moving slow. When he finally made it to Kendall Square, the gorgeous receptionist, who was wearing a mini-skirt, leather boots that reached nearly to her knees, and a long cashmere sweater, greeted him with an angry look. She ushered him into an empty meeting room, where Degner kept him waiting for nearly an hour. Ben knew he deserved every minute. When the tall man came striding in, leaving the door to the room open, he didn't acknowledge Ben's existence. Degner

settled himself into a plush leather chair, and swivelled to turn his back to Ben. “What is it this time? Your little spy turns out to be the bad guy. And you have the audacity to come back to my place?”

“Apology.”

Degner swivelled to face him. “You’re kidding?”

“No. I was out of line. I went overboard.” Ben forced himself not to let his gaze drop to the floor. It wasn’t easy. “My job is to follow leads, and that’s all I was doing with you. It was your gun that killed Brian Mortensen. But I was barking up the wrong tree.”

Degner looked satisfied but didn’t smile.

“It’s hard, sometimes,” Ben said. “You know. To follow leads. To understand the story. You have to push it real hard and sometimes you get it wrong. That’s what happened to me.”

“Yes, it did.” Degner looked at him scornfully but then softened. “But I guess you had your reasons. It was my gun and I did hire that kid Bennett.”

“Right.”

“I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Right.”

“Next time I use one of my own people,” Degner said without a trace of irony.

“Good idea.”

“All right. We make a deal. You keep quiet about me hiring Winfred Bennett, and I keep quiet about you harrasing me.”

Ben couldn't bring himself to say the word "deal" so he nodded.

"Is the kid going to be okay?"

"Yeah," Ben replied, a bit surprised by the question. "He'll be out of jail soon. No charges to press. Who knows, maybe the stint did him some good. Got him clean."

"Silver lining?"

"Minimal, but you never know."

"And you care?"

"I do," Ben said tentatively.

"Why?" Degner asked.

"Who knows. I have a kid about Bennett's age. He's in his own kind of trouble."

Degner looked at him, puzzled. "You know Detective, you and I, we're not that different. My thalamus works just like yours. It absorbs sensory information and sends it to other parts of the brain for processing. My amygdala gets activated, sends the information to the motor cortex. My anterior cingulate—I think of it as a brain within a brain—helps me make decisions. But at some point, who knows why, we do go our separate ways. Maybe genetics, maybe training. Maybe you had a more nurturing childhood than I did."

"Doubt it."

"My father was a very distant man. Cold as ice. He wasn't a Nazi, though."

"I know." Ben took a deep breath. "That was stupid of me. Unfair."

"Right. But he did like things neat, I'll admit that." Degner smiled at the recollection. "Every Sunday, after church, he'd make the whole family clean the house."

We never even went to the church socials, which I would have liked to do. You could meet girls there. No, we just cleaned the damned house.”

“My father had a temper,” Ben offered. “A bad temper.”

“Did he hit you?”

“Never. Just rant. About me. About the world. He liked my brother, though.”

“My father didn’t get angry, but he never talked to me or my brother. Except to give us orders.”

Ben looked at Degner and realized he had no idea why they were talking to each other.

“Let’s face it, Detective, neither of us is very comfortable with other people.”

“I’m making progress.”

“Really?”

“A little, maybe. That’s what my friends tell me, anyway.”

“You know, there’ll be meds on the market soon for people like us. To warm the cockles of tall, cold men who keep their distance.”

“Call it Thermo.”

Degner chuckled. “Not bad.”

Ben did not smile back.

“Maybe some day, you’ll join me for halibut at the Green Room. Just you and me, no women. We’ll trade stories. We’ll talk.”

“I doubt that’ll happen, Doctor.”

“Me too. But you never know.”

“Sometimes you do. But it’s not clear how. Or when. Anyway, Dr. Degner,” he said while standing up, “I’ll say good-bye.”

Degner watched Ben uncoil his large and clumsy frame, and then after a few seconds stood up himself. Neither man was poised to extend a hand for a shake, a fact they both understood and accepted, and Degner was unwilling to say another word. So they nodded at each other, and Ben left the room.

That night, at nearly 1 a.m., Ben met Moira at the Starlight Diner. Both were munching on cold fries. It was snowing outside, and the joint was empty.

“So you did it?” she began.

“I did it. I apologized.”

“Good move.”

“Wasn’t easy.”

“All things excellent are as rare as they are difficult.”

“Who said that?” Ben asked.

“Don’t remember. But not me.”

Ben smiled. “Okay, not you.”

It was obvious to him that she would have welcomed a detailed description of his encounter with Michael Degner, but Ben didn’t feel quite up to that. Moira understood and so she changed the subject. “How’d Fern react when you told her about Bernie?”

“The woman’s a loon. She must have said ‘I told you so’ a thousand times. And she didn’t even seem very surprised that Brian was gay. I think she knew it all the time.”

“Maybe that’s why she married him?” Moira suggested.

“Clue me in.”

“He was unlike every other man that poor woman had ever met. He was the only one who didn’t hunger for her.”

“And didn’t beat her.”

“Her father?”

“Yeah.”

“God, that’s awful.”

“Yes, it is,” Ben said, staring at his plate. “She almost looked satisfied when I explained to her what was going on between him and Bernie.”

“Do you think we’ll ever go on a real date, Ben?” Moira asked.

Ben seemed shocked at the abrupt transition. “What? This isn’t real?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’ve got my hopes up,” he said firmly.

“For now, though, we’ll just keep coming here in the middle of the night?” She looked around cheerfully.

“I like it here. My kind of people.”

“There are no people here.”

Ben looked around. “That’s my point.”

“Now, now. How’s your Dad?” she asked, quick to change the subject again.

Ben smiled. “The docs say he had a heart-attack, so he’s in the cardiac unit at Beth Israel. But he claims he just fell. I put my money on Abe.”

“Wish him luck.”

“I will.” Ben paused. “Maybe you’d like to meet him some day.”

“I would.” Then Moira laughed and her eyes sparkled. “We have a future, you and me.”

“We do?”

“I think so.”

“When does the future start?”

“Who knows. Maybe tonight.”

Unbidden the lyrics from the *West Side Story* song entered his consciousness, and he smiled when he heard the tune inside his head.

“What are you smiling at Ben?”

“Nothing. Tonight. That’s all.” Ben chuckled again and stared out the window at the snow coming down on the deserted Boston street. When his cell phone rang, he reached into his sports jacket, took it out, and flipped it open. It was Neal.

“Sorry, man, you awake?” his partner asked.

“Is rain wet?”

“Gotcha. Listen I’m pulling a little overtime, so I’m doing the night-shift, and we just got a call. Dead black guy in the North End.”

“Really?”

“Would I lie to a pal like you?”

“No, you wouldn’t. Where exactly?”

“Salem street, near the end. Where it’s plenty dark. What do you think? Count you in?”

“I’ll meet you there in 15 minutes.”

Moira looked at him with a combination of sadness and bemusement. “Duty calls, I presume?”

“Girls like you shouldn’t say ‘presume.’”

She smiled.

“But as usual, you’re right,” Ben continued. “That was Neal. We got a job in the North End.”

“So not tonight?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“Don’t be afraid,” she said, and she reached across the table and clasped his right hand with her own. “It’s gonna be okay. You can do this. With me. Or at least you have to promise to try.”

It had been yet another long day, but Ben felt a welcome burst of friendly energy inside his chest, enough to fuel yet another resolution. “I promise to try,” he said. Then he awkwardly worked his legs out from under the table, and said, “come on, Moira. I’ll give you a lift home.”