

GROUNDWATER

The Novel

Note: this book should be required reading for students in
High School or Collegiate level Environmental Science programs

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Rock

Mark Houser knew better, had known better since childhood, especially as a teenager. It was hounded into him at home by dad and in an endless stream of media during his high school years. Hell, it was even pounded from the pulpit by preachers and exploited by politicians out to aggrandize themselves with their congregations or constituents.

Yeah, he knew better than to speed. But under the right pressure, anyone will succumb . . . and under the *worst* circumstances, right? Always the worst of circumstances!

“I *hate* these concrete highway dividers they string through construction zones!”

But only the inside lane was clear enough to maintain 85 mph. Any other time, he’d use a lane away from the dividers after dark. The problem was, he had assured Doreen that he wouldn’t be late for Tim’s tenth birthday party. He’d missed it completely last year, had to leave town on a moment’s notice. It had been among the most cherished traditions in her family as a child, and now was one of theirs.

The party was planned to begin at 6:30 pm. Now, at 7:00, pitch-dark except for a sea of headlights focused dutifully on the road ahead, he was still fifteen minutes from the *Woods* exit. *Woods* was one of many gated communities west of Houston.

“When a geologist is logging a borehole,” he would remind her, “he can’t just walk away from the drill rig.”

The hole drilled this afternoon was critical; it required germane geological data from every five feet of depth. The geologist gathers soil or rock cuttings continuously pushed out the top of the hole by the rotating auger, examines them, and notes the type of sediments at that depth. Is it sand, silt, clay, etc.? Each soil sample collected has to be laid out in the sun on a small plastic baggy to dry, and the data recorded on the all-important *Drill log* upon which everything that occurs on-site afterward will be based.

“He *can’t* just walk away.”

They should’ve completed that damned hole by 4:30 easily, but the rig was acting up, the auger

bouncing off a layer of very hard, calcium-rich caliches 43 feet down. It was having trouble penetrating that layer. The foreman had shut down the rig.

“Just for a few minutes,” he’d mumbled in a reassuring manner, as if he actually believed himself.

All drillers know how irritated geologists become standing around waiting for rig problems to be corrected. They were there to do science, not nursemaid worn-out equipment.

The “few minutes” soon stretched into more than an hour . . . as usual.

“You guys should tow this pile of junk a mile out to sea,” he’d yelled to be heard above the roar of the welder, “Dump it atop an artificial reef, so at least it can contribute to the quality of near-shore fishing!”

By the time the rig was adjusted, the caliche penetrated, and the hole completed to sixty-three feet where Mark had determined they need drill no further, it was already 6:00 p.m. Bagging and labeling the now-dry samples took until 6:30. Only then had he leapt into his new Land Rover and headed for home, soon averaging 85 mph.

As he ran the gauntlet of heavy traffic, it was tough to maneuver without any lane markers painted yet on the new asphalt to his right. The endless concrete snake of three-foot high dividers on his left made it that much more hectic. He could imagine Tim sitting at the dining table with the seven friends attending his party. The table would be spread meticulously, all of the accouterments in place. Doreen was fastidious about such things. No doubt, Tim was mesmerized by the pile of gifts in front of him, anxiously trying to divine what was hidden beneath each brilliantly colored design of wrapping paper, stunned by the colorful, flowing bows. He was even now surrounded by a chattering milieu of tiny guests, trying to remain patient.

“And Doreen is becoming anxious,” he thought.

By now, the situation must be growing tense indeed. Mark applied even more determination to the pedal.

From around the curve ahead, two cars from the opposite direction suddenly appeared, ignoring his frantic blinking for them to dim their lights . . . this just as a car was passing on his right much too close.

“How can *anyone* need to drive faster than I’m going?” he blurted out.

The high-beams from the two vehicles fused in a blinding wash of halogen blaze, and he couldn’t see

the dividers! For an instant, he couldn't see *anything*. He clutched the steering wheel more tightly.

He first knew he was in trouble when the front wheel made contact, heaving the left front several feet into the air as the tire rode up the divider's sloping side. The car pounded back down with tremendous force, generating a hard lurch to the right. Time moved into slow motion.

"I've got to hold it!" he thought.

But instead, it veered wildly across the right lanes at a precarious angle, narrowly missing two other cars. The tearing screech of raw rubber against newly rolled asphalt was all around him as he approached the far right edge of the highway.

"You have to correct it!" he told himself, pulling hard to the left, careening within a hair's breadth of a semi. The foghorn volume when the trucker sounded his horn further unnerved him. Just when he thought he'd stopped skidding and straightened the Rover, he realized his speed was so great, momentum was edging him off the asphalt, beyond which only a few feet of poorly compacted gravel separated him from a looming, twenty-foot-high cliff, created when the roadway was cut.

"I can't let this happen," his mind raced, *"I've got to stay on asphalt till I can slow down."*

He applied more brake, easing the steering wheel to the left. It seemed to be working until the rear of the Rover spun to the right and off the edge. Time speeded up again.

"Turn into the slide or you'll flip the vehicle!" shot into his mind.

Turning into this one would put the Rover completely onto the gravel, inches from the jagged rock, still at high speed. But he had no choice. There were only two options: flip the vehicle or leave the road entirely, possibly losing the last shred of control. He glanced at the speedometer: down to *sixty-eight*.

The gravel was unstable. In the haunting light of the vehicles behind, the Rover's dust chased him like a grotesque, dirty cloud. His foot was still instinctively on the brake, causing the rear of the vehicle to swerve, jerking him farther to the right. He felt he was being bisected by the clutch of the seat belt. The force ripped one muscled arm from the steering wheel, causing the other to pull sharply toward the cliff as he righted himself. At that tiny, telling moment, the icy grip of panic seized him. Time dropped into low gear again, but yielded no advantage. It slowed only to mock his folly, to let him witness--vividly--instant by

instant, the consequences of ignoring when he knew better. He caught a fleeting glimpse of the speedometer while trying to pull back toward the pavement: down to *fifty-four*. Then came the first horrid grinding of the cliff grating the right rear; rock versus metal, man versus the elements from which he so warily secludes himself. But they were always there. The *rock* was always there, waiting for the slightest mishap. It had been there long before the first geologist studied it, and would still be there long after the last geologist was gone. No one knew that better than he.

“How ironic . . .” he stoically mused, “for a geologist to be confronting rock on its *own* terms.”

But he was, now merely the protagonist in a macabre, terrestrial drama brandishing a dreamlike quality, rock ripping into his life with a vengeance as though he’d personally offended it.

Almost immediately, it was the right front against the cliff.

“*Is this the end? Am I going to die?*” He wondered. The entire world seemed to turn upside down, assailing him with ghastly cacophonies: A refrain of crashing metal mimicking cymbals in the hands of a madman, a chorus of smashing glass flung against his face, the trolling of searing pain from the muscle and bone of his left shoulder. As his mind fogged over, he buried his bloodied face within cupped hands. Doreen and Tim’s faces flitted into view. Then . . . nothing.

“**M**r. Lucky,” he heard a male voice announce. “If you hadn’t been wearing your seat belt, you’d be in worse condition than your car.”

Mark had opened his eyes with effort; the eyelids seemed glued together.

“So, how *is* our pilot today?” The male voice asked.

Blurry at first, he tried to focus upon the man in the white coat who must be a doctor.

“Pilot?” It was difficult to find humor in the pejorative, or speak through his parched, dry throat.

“Not so well,” he responded, agony cloaking his features. “My left shoulder’s killing me . . . can I have some water?”

“I’m not surprised; your shoulder is black as night.”

“How am I?”

“Other than fracturing your left collar bone, bruising the joint in your shoulder, and giving yourself a serious concussion, I’d say it wasn’t your time to go.” He poured a cup of water and steadied Mark. “The ice is melted, but its wet . . . *Careful*, Buddy, not so fast.”

Mark sucked down the water like his first breath after contests in the pool as kids, seeing how long they could stay under.

“Has Doreen been here, my wife? Does she know?”

“Is Mrs. Houser here?” The doctor asked the nurse.

“Not at the moment, Doctor; She had to go home. The babysitter couldn’t stay any longer.” Pitying Mark’s expression, she added, “Don’t worry, she’s hardly left your bedside during the past four days.”

“Four days!” Mark almost shouted, “*Four* days?”

“Every bit of it,” the doctor replied. “What happened out there?”

“ . . . I did something I shouldn’t have and my number came up.” He really didn’t want to remember. “Was anyone else hurt? My God, can you give me something for the pain in my shoulder?”

“Fifty Demerol,” the doctor whispered aloud to the nurse, “every four hours if he needs it.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Mark said as she hurried off, “I hit a divider in that construction zone before the exit to *Woods*. I lost control, angled to the right across the highway, hit a cliff, and flipped. That’s the last thing I remember.”

“It looked impressive on the *Late News* a few nights ago.”

“It was on the News?”

“You know how people enjoy things like a guard rail thrust through the front window of an upside down vehicle, penetrating half its length. Yours looked totaled. Miraculously, it didn’t run through you, or you’d have been totaled as well.”

“I couldn’t re-enter the roadway . . . loose gravel . . . and I was driving much too fast.”

“I don’t think any other car was involved, so you needn’t worry about a string of nasty lawsuits plaguing your life for the next five years. I have a feeling your insurance is going up, though.”

The nurse returned with the painkiller “Let’s turn you a little on your side, Mr. Houser.” A few

seconds later, he could at least contemplate that the pain would back off.

“I’ll check on you later, Mark,” the doctor said, updating his chart. “Try not to aggravate that shoulder.”

“Thanks again.” Suddenly, Mark became aware of a myriad of colors around the room.

“Flowers . . . so many.” He said, as the nurse pulled the sheet back over him, and laid the call button and T.V. control at his side.

“You must have a great many friends. It’s hard to navigate among all of these arrangements. Your wife and son are adorable. She’s spoken of you quite a lot. Just push this button if you need me. Push this one to watch the TV.” She patted Mark’s good shoulder. “Try to get as much sleep as possible.”

“I think I’ve slept enough . . . four days!”

“You have a point.” she smiled.

It seemed to him like it had only been a second ago. As the Demerol began to take effect, the pain subsided, and his thoughts ventured. When had Doreen first heard? What happened at the party? Had *Delta Geotechnical* been informed? Yes, someone at the office would have seen the news, read it in the paper. Doreen would have called them. He had forgotten to ask the doctor how long before he could return to work. He began drifting toward sleep. He would obtain his answers when he talked to Doreen. She would bring Tim with her when she learned he had regained consciousness.

He wasn’t certain how long he’d slept, but he remembered crying out, the nurse rolling him over for another injection, and being walked, IV bags in tow, to the toilet and back. The afternoon sunlight peering through the window was reminiscent of the blinding halogens of the oncoming cars at the onset of his debacle. When he reawakened, it was night, and he felt less pain. Doreen and Tim sat next to his bed, asleep in their chairs, Tim clutching two unfamiliar “guys,” one in each hand. The birthday party had enriched his collection. Seeing them close by soothed Mark’s bruised ego. Doreen’s pained expression caused by the discomfort of the chair touched him. Observing their countenances in the semi-darkness stimulated fond memories.

They had met during graduate school, he aspiring to become a geologist, she pursuing a Masters in

Journalism under a full scholarship. A Florida girl who had grown up in the Keys and completed her undergraduate work at the University of Miami, Doreen had a seductive smile that seldom left her face. Upon meeting her the first time, he had succumbed to that smile. Sitting in the cafeteria, he had overheard her conversing with two other graduate student mates at an adjoining table. He was impressed by her intelligence and strong opinions about politics as they argued the fine points of controversial issues. She had noticed him smiling.

“You’re a good-looking hunk.” she had said before turning back to her friends. Stricken, he had chewed slowly so they finished at the same time, and as her friends left, he engaged her in conversation. They had clicked. Completely different programs and busy schedules barred seeing each other often, sometimes for days, but it was sufficient to discover that, more than anything else, she wanted to become an investigative reporter in a major news organization.

Mark had been raised in El Paso. He’d spent many a weekend in the *Sierra de Juarez* mountains south of the Juarez border crossing. In his teens, he had come to know every rock formation and fossil series in that triple-overthrust like the back of his hand and always had a deep bronze tan from long days spent in the desert sun. Motorists passing through west Texas and New Mexico saw only dry, desolate, desert, but to him it abounded in life; not merely the paleobiology of the fossil record, but the rich desert fauna and flora most people missed. He amazed his cousins when they visited during summer vacations by taking them fossil hunting and exploring among the various formations, showing them how to tell one stratum, one layer of rock, from another by the kinds of fossils it contained. They were dumbfounded when he literally *ran* down mountain slopes, knowing just which boulder or rock to land on with each stride, just how to turn his foot to keep from dislodging it or tripping. He was strong. He didn’t lift weights; he didn’t like the look, but he was solid muscle from head to foot. He already knew he wanted to become a geologist while most of his classmates were still undecided about their choice of career. Hanging out south of the border, he also learned the difference between good Tequila and the junk, and the succulent bliss of *cabrito*--roasted, baby goat--with fresh salsa he had enjoyed both in the *restaurantes* and purchased from the street vendors of Juarez.

He and Doreen had dated during their last year of graduate school, and spent almost an entire summer

biking on his Harley in the Basin and Range province before their marriage in Las Vegas a year later. He was impressed with her seeming interest in anything and everything. She insisted upon digging out fossils side-by-side with him, and tolerated no condescension, demanding unvarnished explanations of what they found. During the evenings, as music and news from some distant station flowed from a portable shortwave, he built a campfire, and they'd sit outside the tent in the moonlight, discussing the day, or planning their activities for the next. By the by, he realized he missed her evening chow whipped up over the campfire when they opted for a restaurant. Most of all, he was fascinated by those deep brown eyes, eyes that sparkled with intelligence, warm with passion. Her wavy hair had been close-cropped at the base during school, but had since overflowed the shoulders of a curvy, five-foot, eight figure, a mere inch shorter than his. She once told him she wished her breasts were larger, but he had assured her that they were more than adequate for his needs. A developing love led to marriage, with Tim following a year later.

As a mother, Doreen proved to have mystical abilities, like finding anything he or Tim had misplaced, be it a geologic report left in the den, or a shoe hiding under the far corner of Tim's bed. No amount of effort could inculcate Tim with the importance of remembering where he'd left them last. Such intuitive force was a solid asset for the tough profession she'd chosen. Any investigative reporter who lacked it would find themselves editing copy again soon enough. Everyone said the boy looked like his mother, but Doreen knew his major interest was being with Mark, wanting to be just like him. While he was still in diapers, Mark began a tradition of taking him on an out-of-town trip one weekend every month, which he called *Boy's Night*. By his tenth birthday, Tim knew more about geology and science than any other ten-year-old around. On Boy's Nights, they'd check into a remote motel in an old mining town, or one near interesting geological formations, or a site Mark knew had easy to find fossils. There, they'd have dinner together, afterward getting a good night's rest. Sleep usually ended early the next morning with Tim nudging Mark, dressed in one of the little khaki outfits Doreen had made for his "treks across the veldt" with dad.

"Hurry, Dad, let's get started exploring!" He was all boy! Occasionally, they'd just hit the local *Game Town* and stuff quarters until the place closed or they ran out of money. Or they might go see a movie Tim had heard about. A hallowed trip by the market to load up on treats always preceded returning to their motel

and lying side by side on the bed, watching cable until they fell asleep from a sugar low.

As the years passed, Boy's Night became as traditional as Santa Claus and apple pie, and Mark looked forward to it as much as Tim. Doreen used those opportunities to catch up on her reading. If she wasn't researching some story or issue, there was always a new historical romance, or a novel by Clancey, Grisham, King, or Crichton she'd hadn't settled in with yet.

One afternoon the previous year, as the family left for a weekend at the lake, Tim had seemed especially quiet. Both Mark and Doreen had noticed and made eye contact, neither having a clue. Later, Tim leaned over the front seat between them and asked with great poignancy,

“Dad, is Boy's Night *true*?”

Mark returned Doreen's puzzled look.

“What do you mean, Son?”

“I was telling Tommy about our last Boy's Night, and his big brother said it wasn't true . . . he never heard of Boy's Night, and his dad never went anywhere just with them. I called him a liar. Boy's Night *is* true, right Dad?”

Mark glanced at Doreen, soft tears working their way down her face. It was a spiritual moment for them as parents.

“Tim, it's true in our family,” she explained, “but not all families know about it, so it might not be true for them.”

Tim sat back reflecting on the matter. Claiming there was no such thing as Boy's Night was like telling other kids there was no such thing as a Tooth Fairy. Mark had felt very proud at that moment, the way he had always imagined a father should feel. Now, Tim was a vigorous ten-year-old, busy figuring out the world, sleeping beside his mother in the chair--*being big*--helping keep watch on Dad.

“And to think,” Mark thought as he watched them sleep, “There wouldn't even be a Tim . . . Doreen and I would never have met . . . if the ominous wind of U.S. politics hadn't interrupted my career plans, blowing them away.”

Mark had the highest grade point average in the entire Geology department at Tulane University in New Orleans, a department of more than 300 majors, the majority hoping to be offered a position with one of the big Gulf Coast oil companies upon graduation. New Orleans' position near the mouth of the mighty Mississippi was home to big oil; not like Houston, but its position on the Mississippi delta, actually seven ancient deltas, and the existence of many salt domes secluding oil around their perimeters was a paramount focus of the oil industry. Louisiana was a major oil and gas producing state, and being an Exploration geologist was just about the hottest career opportunity around. Each year, the major with the highest GPA received the coveted *New Orleans Geological Society* scholarship; coveted, because the NOGS award meant offers from the local big oil companies, the *majors*. Mark had offers from both Gulf and Texaco before the end of his junior year, and his future held great promise. Following graduation, he would move in a single leap from the student dorm and a lifestyle in which his economic survival was rooted in a diet of red beans, rice, and *Polski Kilbasa* sausage to a fine apartment with the money to enjoy New Orleans the way it was meant to be enjoyed.

The great old city had an uncontested reputation of the best food in the country. Tourists joined the locals at the crab shacks along the shores of Lake Ponchartrain or gathered around a wash tub of boiled crawfish dumped on spread newspapers. New Orleans had the best seafood, the best French and Cajun cuisine, and the finest okra gumbo made anywhere in the world. Everything would change following graduation. The used telephone company truck with six-ply tires that hadn't gone flat for four years would be traded in for any make and model he desired. He'd pay off his college loans and enjoy the rewards of sacrifice and ambition. Then, without warning, the government targeted the very industry for which he had prepared himself so well. Its weapon: the *Windfall Profits Tax*.

The idea that gasoline had always been cheap and should always *stay* cheap was firmly rooted in the American mentality. As graduation neared, oil prices had risen sharply, lingering at \$32 per barrel. At that price, *alternate* energy sources had become economically feasible. Every energy savant knew that \$32 was the transition point, the boundary condition where alternate energy sources could be produced economically.

Dozens of industries and hundreds of projects to produce gas from coal, oil from oil shale, alcohol from fermented vegetation, and many others were underway. Energy independence was projected by the year 2000. Everyone in the industry knew that there was enough natural gas under the state of Louisiana alone to run the entire nation for three hundred years! . . . clean-burning, easily liquified, natural gas. It was deep, but it was there, and it would have changed the future of U.S. politics, and certainly U.S.- Middle Eastern history, if the political will had existed. It didn't. Just as Mark was about to enter the industry as an exploration geologist, congress passed the tax. Under the rules, *existing* oil reserves were defined as "old" oil. "New" oil from new discoveries, the kind the exploration geologist searches for, would be taxed punitively than old oil. A clever twist of the rule defined imported oil as *old*! The industry sat back and pondered congress's message. It took about sixty seconds to get it.

"Import oil; build energy *dependence*."

In exchange, the Saudi's agreed to lower the price, open the spigot, and let the crude flow. The price of oil and gasoline tumbled, and people kissed the soles of the politician's feet. The year of his graduation, the domestic industry contracted as the majors scrambled into a series of mergers. Those with good market position but low reserves merged with those having a less favorable position but large reserves--*old* oil. There were fewer companies, but the survivors had a better balance of market versus reserves. The rest? They would import. Imports took up all slack in U.S. production. No alternate energy research could continue with oil at \$18/bbl. It wasn't economically feasible any longer. Energy independence became a vanishing dream with every annual rise in imports. Most graduates never saw their dreams of working in the oil industry materialize. Of course, the *public* perception was that the "greedy" oil companies had gotten a well-deserved slap from the government, and good ole congressman X had voted for it.

"*What a great man indeed!*"

Mark had been stunned. The very government that provided the college loans to obtain his degree from one of the world's great universities had destroyed the future of that profession, but still left him fully obligated to repay every dollar. Still, he was luckier than most. He had watched the development of a new field of geology, *Hydrogeology*. "Hydro" means water, and the hydrogeologist's arena is *groundwater*. If it's

clean, public health is maintained, but if it's contaminated, health can be degraded. Any source of contamination constitutes a threat to the public health. Little else is more important than clean water.

At the same time that it destroyed exploration geology, the government fostered an explosion within the specialization of hydrogeology. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency became acutely aware that eighty percent of the two million underground storage tanks beneath the corner gas stations and elsewhere weren't just storing fuel and chemicals; they were also leaking it--sometimes *lots* of it--into the soils in which they were buried. The problem was severe and promised to become much worse, because almost all stations had more than one tank buried underground, which caused electrical currents to flow between them, accelerating corrosion rates, much like a steel-hulled ship would quickly disappear beneath the sea without zinc plugs attached that will preferentially dissolve into the seawater rather than the steel hull. As the soil surrounding the underground storage tanks becomes saturated, the fuel moves down, often coming into contact with the water table. And since groundwater has both a direction and a velocity, the floating fuel moves down gradient along with the groundwater. Because fuel is less dense than water, it floats on the surface. This floating fuel is referred to as *Free Product*. Sometimes, the owner was unaware he had a problem, and the free product had been accumulating undetected for years. It could be several feet thick, or, it might be nothing more than a visible sheen on the surface of a water sample collected from a monitoring well. It might be groundwater with gasoline dissolved into it, or it might be pure, floating fuel filling the space between soil particles *thirty feet* thick or more above the surface of the groundwater, depending entirely upon local geologic conditions and the type of fuel. Mark had heard of one such mass beneath a railroad yard in El Paso during a visit to his parents.

The area of the groundwater surface affected by floating or dissolved fuel is referred to as the *plume*. Some plumes are very small and localized, maybe twenty-feet wide and forty feet long in the down gradient direction if one was viewing the groundwater from above. Others were found to extend for hundreds of feet, and in extreme cases, for *miles* in the direction the groundwater was moving. Moving plumes sometimes encounter city or private water wells used to supply drinking water. Plumes grow wider and wider as they move along. They're generally pear-shaped, the big end of the pear pointing down gradient, in the

groundwater *flow direction*.

But there is an even bigger and much more serious problem. Gasoline isn't *just* distilled oil! It may contain up to twenty-six percent of added chemicals; chemicals added to boost the octane, to keep the carburetor clean, or to improve the degree of combustion of the gasoline, reducing harmful vapor in the car's exhaust, increasing miles-per-gallon. The problem is, these additives are carcinogenic. If ingested by humans, they can cause cancer. The big ones are a group of chemicals collectively referred to as BTEX (Benzene, Toluene, Ethyl Benzene, and Xylene). They don't just float on the groundwater. They dissolve *into* it, thereafter moving down gradient as fast as the water itself. This dissolved plume usually extends much farther down gradient than the free product plume, because the latter's movement is hampered by the drier soil it moves through above the water line of the water it's floating on. Much of it adheres to the soil particles along the way, remaining behind. *Nothing* hinders the dissolved plume. When the water is withdrawn and drunk, the carcinogens go to work.

At first, the public had trouble comprehending how small a quantity of these contaminants can cause cancer. To help them grasp the danger, it was occasionally explained that if 7.6 billion golf balls, representing benzene molecules, were stretched between the earth and the moon, as few as 38 of them, a mere five parts per billion, could cause cancer!

As soon as Mark confronted his fate as an unemployable exploration geologist, he applied to *Texas A&M* and was accepted into the hydrogeology graduate program. Hydrogeologists were quickly becoming more esteemed than any other specialization within the field of geology. They were in demand, "because more than anyone else, they understand the mechanics of how geology and groundwater interact. They are the mystics capable of addressing what has now become the subject of a national panic: contaminated groundwater." he had read.

As he gazed upon Doreen's face, he wondered what life would have been like if the political winds had not blown him to Texas and to Doreen. At that moment, she stirred, opened her eyes, and for the first time in four days, they met Mark's.

"Hi, Baby! How do you feel?" She asked, rising and moving toward him in the shadows. Her embrace

was cautious, gentle. “I’m so glad you’re back; I’ve missed you desperately. I couldn’t see your handsome, green eyes, nor hear your voice. For a while, we were *afraid* . . . ”

“I love you, Doreen. I feel terrible I missed the party. “

”Forget the party, Baby. Everything was fine, and Tim understands you were trying to get there.”

“I’ll be out of here in no time. It’s a nightmare I want to forget.”

They held each other like shipwreck victims clinging to a floating mast after the ship has disappeared beneath a dark sea.

“Everyone’s asking about you; the phone hasn’t stopped ringing. Jess at Delta may have set the record. He said if . . . *when* you came out of it, to tell you they put Doug on the Convention Center site, for you not to worry about anything except getting well. They’re already missing their best hydrogeologist!”

Mark tried his best at a convincing smile, but his shoulder demanded attention.

“Could you ask the nurse to give me a pain shot, Hon? My shoulder’s killing me.”

Doreen darted out of the room, returning with the nurse. After giving Mark the injection without drawing the curtain, she replaced an empty IV bag, and left the room. Mark looked so pitiful to Doreen, lying there with black eyes, a swollen lip, and cuts marring his face. The ugly lump beneath the left side of his scalp had shrunk somewhat, but it still terrified her.

“We don’t have to talk just now,” she whispered.

“I *want* to talk, to hear your voice; it’s sweet to me.” She kissed him passionately, needing to touch him, to feel his breath against her cheek.

“Our moms have been network operators. After I called them, they must have contacted everyone they know. Can you believe the lovely flowers? You’re loved Mark! I want this to end. I want you home.”

“You’re more precious than all these flowers.”

“*How can he be so sweet in his horrible condition,*” she wondered? He looked like a terminal accident victim.

Enough had been said for the moment. Against hospital rules, she lifted the sheet, maneuvering her body against Mark's, avoiding the side with the blue-black shoulder and an IV in the arm.

“I can feel your heart beating, Baby.” she said. But he was gone . . . somewhere beneath the shroud of the injection. That was okay; he wasn’t feeling any pain. She laid quietly, absorbing his smell. His masculine voice had been reassuring.

Following report and shift change at midnight, Mark’s nurse entered the room. She found him sleeping peacefully. Snuggled against him was the sweet woman she had visited with over the last four days, learning she was a reporter at the *Houston Chronicle*. Sleeping in the same bed with a patient clearly violated hospital rules. Curled up in a chair nearby was their handsome little son, half-smiling in his sleep.

“What the hell,” she thought to herself, and left the room quietly.

Reunion

It felt good to be reporting back to Delta Geotechnical. As Mark parked his rental car in the lot, no one recognized him. He had mixed feelings, anxious to get back to work, but knowing there would likely be jokes at his expense. He felt as if returning after an unauthorized six-week vacation. Recovery had been slow, but steady; his shoulder and collar bone healed, although there was one point in the arc when he raised his left arm that still returned a painful complaint. The doctor had assured him that this, too, would gradually disappear over the coming weeks.

“Joint and ligament damage requires time to heal, Mark.”

He had to be careful how he slept on his left side, but he had been cleared to return to work. To his surprise, he wasn't greeted with a flurry of jokes or even requests to tell the long version of what had happened to him, “*and give us all the morbid details.*” Everyone seemed to sense that he wanted the entire affair left in the past. Besides, Delta was behind schedule and the geologists were too busy to spend much time on anything impertinent. There were smiles and waves, all sincere, but not the type that hamper.

Mark was the Principal Hydrogeologist at Delta, and his absence had put that much additional pressure on everyone else. They were exultant to see him back. Jess Remington, owner of Delta, met him almost at the door with a tight, heartfelt handshake. Jess was a big man . . . not fat, more like a steel-reinforced Swede sailor Mark had seen drunk in a longshoreman's bar in Charleston, South Carolina years before. Jess didn't get drunk, not very often. He towered over everyone at Delta. He denied lifting weights, but everyone doubted his assertions enough that a kitty was established by the geologists for the first person to prove he did. It was already more than \$300, but no luck for anyone yet. He had a friendly face, and the girls in the office said he was really just a huge Teddy Bear.

Mark knew differently. Some time ago, an angry client had stormed into the office with his first monthly invoice, asking where *Accounting* was. He immediately went in yelling at the top of his lungs that Delta was “a bunch of goddamned thieves” and be damned if he'd pay a cent of the wretched thing.

“It’s all a scheme set up by lawyers and politicians to put everyone *in* business *out* of business, by sucking them dry. *Twenty-three thousand dollars for one month’s work?* If you sons’ o’ bitches think you’re milking me for a quarter of a million during the next year, you’re full o’ shit, *all* of you. If the goddam government wants to clean it up, they or their goddam tree-huggers can pay for it!”

Marlene, head of Client Billing, tried to calm him by attempting a point-by-point explanation of the bill. But it wasn’t any particular item he was raging about. It was sheer, out-of-control, frothing contempt for a political system that could enact environmental legislation that set up a successful, mid-life businessman admired by his community, and suddenly convert him into a criminal by *definition*. Then, without trial or sentence, require him to pay for the environmental remediation of his site, turning a deaf ear as he was systematically ruined financially and viewed with suspicion by the community. It wasn’t any single item. It was the entire experience.

Having but recently returned to work after burying her mother, Marlene was much too fragile to confront such behavior or language, and had already begun to cry when the door to Accounting flew open like a charging bull had crashed through it. Jess walked up to the man without saying a word, grabbed him by the collar, almost lifting him off the floor, and pulled him, cursing and trying to break free or make contact with a barrage of fists, to his office. Practically everyone in the company saw it, Jess walking along almost without effort, dragging a hysterical client through the middle of the office, then down the hall. They also heard the door slam with enough force to surely pop the hinges loose. The man was still yelling, but clearly outmatched by Jess’s thundering voice, which seemed to have a calming effect on the fellow. Afterward, the yelling stopped, and about two hours later, the incongruent sound of two men laughing emerged. The client and Jess came walking calmly down the hall, Jess’s huge arm around him like he was a visiting brother he hadn’t seen in years. They spent the last ten minutes before coming out telling lawyer jokes, a favorite pastime of Jess’s.

“What’s five-hundred lawyers at the bottom of a lake?” they heard Jess ask, as they were coming down the hall.

“Tell me.”

“A good start!”

As they passed through the big center area, no one dared look in their direction except Mark, who got an embarrassed look from the client when he caught his glance.

“We’re off to lunch,” Jess announced as they were leaving together, “on Delta.”

Jess was like that. He seemed able to handle any situation and wasn’t afraid of anything-nor anyone. Yet, he genuinely cared about every employee and never failed to show it. Strangely, the client *paid* the invoice, and every statement that followed it. Delta kept the account, and Marlene was surprised by a beautiful card of apology, attached to a box of gourmet chocolates!

“God, I’m glad to see you back and looking so fit,” Jess said. “I don’t see any scars on your face. When I visited your room the next day, it had bloody wounds covering it like a teen with pimples.”

“Well, most of the small punctures from flying glass looked horrible with blood leaking out, but they healed quickly. The worst ones are on my scalp, but now that they’re healed, you can’t see them for the hair, and the lump’s gone. I had another I was pretty worried about on my left eyebrow, swollen and hard as a rock for weeks, but the hair grew back over it and it shrunk. You can feel it, but you can’t see it.”

Jess rubbed the spot with the tip of his big index finger.

“Yeah, you’re right, I can definitely feel it, but you have to know it’s there to notice it. Boy, talk about charmed; seeing you walk in like nothing ever happened has a *Twilight Zone* aspect. You must have an important purpose, Mark Houser. We were having morbid thoughts when we saw your Rover upside down with a guard rail through it. The next day was the quietest this office has seen in a long time. And now, here you stand!”

“I’m ready to dig in, Jess. I don’t even like remembering it. It’s a bad dream to me now . . . no, more a nightmare.”

“I guess so.” Jess empathized, placing his big hands on Mark’s shoulders. “Doug is anxious to see you. They’ve run into problems at the Convention Center site. He thinks the former consultant got the groundwater gradient wrong . . . reversed, in fact. Also, some of the water samples had carbon tetrachloride at concentrations off the chart, but only in a very restricted area. In the area caddy-corner from the Chronicle

building, the same thing happened, but it was *Stoddard solvent*.”

“Do they know if a Dry Cleaners ever operated near the carbon tet’ shows?”

“He’s got Mel down at county checking on it, but I haven’t heard any feedback yet. He put the entire file on your desk before leaving this morning . . . said you could talk about it after you’ve had a chance to review the data collected to date. Some of the other guys need your help on a few things too. It’s your call, but I’d suggest hanging close to the office today and clearing up their problems. You can go directly to the Convention Center site from *Woods* tomorrow. It’ll be a shorter drive. I saw you wince when I put my hands on your shoulders. Maybe you should go a little slow at first, instead of at your normal pace.”

“It’s my left arm; sometimes, for no explicable reason, it just goes limp for a second, like dead meat. Then it’s like it hadn’t even happened. Don’t worry, Jess, the doctor said it’ll be fine . . . really!”

“Mr. Remington, there’s a call for you on line two,” a familiar voice rang from the intercom. “I’ll take it in my office, Della,” Jess said in his gruff voice. Dropping his hands from Mark’s shoulders and heading down the hall toward his office, he glanced back as he walked.

“I’m available if you need me.”

“Sure,” Mark responded, beaming.

He made his usual daily round through the office, getting through the greetings and helping each geologist with snags and various issues pertaining to their site investigations. Most Delta geologists had little or no training in Hydrogeology, so they made the classic errors that resulted from lack of a thorough understanding of the principles involved in a groundwater investigation. He remembered how during graduate study he was constantly surprised. Often, he’d have disagreed with the instructor on how groundwater behaves or actually interacts within the soils if someone else had made such claims, because it seemed contrary to logic. There weren’t enough hydrogeologists to go around these days, so most mid-sized firms like Delta employed geologists who once aspired to work in the oil industry, but had settled for whatever they could get. Unlike Mark, they had not taken the step of a graduate degree in Hydrogeology, so they were dubiously qualified, often weak in the cognate subjects by which the power of hydrogeology is crucially supported: chemistry, especially *biochemistry*, physics, especially the physics of fluid flow through

porous media like soil or rock, and biology, especially *microbiology*. Of course, some of them were much better than the rest. Site investigations followed a somewhat standardized approach, so with the guidance of a trained hydrogeologist, they eventually became as valuable as their paychecks suggested.

After lunch, he settled into his chair and began a review of data obtained from chemical analysis of samples obtained from soil borings and groundwater monitoring well samples collected from the Convention Center site. Delta hadn't worked there in the beginning. The first consulting company had been fired by the owner, and no one seemed to know why. Afterward, the client had visited with Jess, subsequently giving the required site-investigation project to Delta. The city purchased the property because it needed a bigger facility not too far from the city center. The site was large enough, and close enough, to seem perfect. But it had come at a very high price, and the purchase had been a football in local politics for over a year before the city council negotiated a staggering 207 million dollars. It was owned by one, Randle Ted Gangley, a name the public was generally unfamiliar with, but that was associated with questionable activities in the minds of some. The file contained virtually no information of this nature, but it seemed to Mark that the work completed by the first company had been spotty and poorly organized. It appeared to have had only one objective: complete the mandated assessment while performing as few tasks as possible. The city's contracts contained a standard environmental contingency clause in all real estate purchases. If found to be environmentally impaired in any way, the city could withdraw, or, at its option, allow the seller to mitigate the offending impairment at his own expense. This clause wasn't unusual at all, except for the huge pile of money at stake; 207 million was a lot of dough.

The six-square-block site consisted of many smaller property acquisitions all bundled into one whole. When first reviewed environmentally, a number of abandoned underground storage tanks, referred to as *USTs* in the industry, were discovered on widely separated areas of the six-square-block site. The EPA had mandated that all USTs in operation across the entire nation--those with chemicals or fuel in them--had to be pressure-tested annually. The pressure test involves pumping air into the tank to a certain pressure, then watching it for a time to see if the needle drops on the pressure gauge. If it does, the tank is assumed to be leaking and fails the test. When that happens, it has to be closed. *Closing* a metal UST means emptying it,

digging it up, and replacing it with a double-walled fiberglass variety, assuring a long service life without corrosion-induced leaks, which are called *releases*. And by law, releases must be reported to the state within 24 hours of discovery.

The real money for the environmental industry is not in the removal and replacement of leaking USTs, although that segment of the industry was initially on a roll. There are only so many USTs in the country, despite the large total. During removal of the majority of USTs, contaminated soil is encountered. This is logical, since failure to pass the pressure test indicates it has corrosion holes that have generated releases. After a release is reported to the state environmental agency, a case number is assigned, and the case is given to one of the regulators, usually called Case Officers or a similar appellation. The owner receives a letter from the case officer citing violation of environmental regulations, and at that point an entire sheaf of regulatory requirements kicks in. The requirements are highly technical and the letter will refer to numerous regulations the owner is required to comply with to remediate the problem, i.e., clean it up! All work must be under the supervision of a state-certified geologist, environmental manager, engineer, or whatever a particular state calls these wizards. That's when the phone rings at Delta Geotechnical and other companies. They are trained professionals who work by the hour and have an hourly rate charged for every hour they work on a particular project. A regular geologist might have a billing rate of \$75 to \$100 per hour. A hydrogeologist will cost more, primarily because he can accomplish more in less time. The firm's Principal hydrogeologist has the highest rate. Mark's time was billed out by Delta at \$150 per hour. The simple tasks are generally assigned to those with lower rates, particularly those services requiring many hours to perform. The review work is done by more highly qualified personnel, and the design of work plans, drilling programs, and evaluation of the whole is within the provenance of the Principal hydrogeologist. Hydrogeology is a science with the purpose of solving problems. Site characterizations are expensive; drilling soil borings, installing groundwater monitoring wells, pulling samples, chemical analysis of soil and water samples; all of these activities are expensive, and the total cost is on a par with the legal costs of important cases.

If it works properly, the process is good, not only for the professionals, but especially for the owner of the property who has one hell of a yoke fastened around his neck by the government. Confused, financially

threatened, defensive, angry, and plagued by a sense of helplessness, the owner watches his bank account shrink as the bills arrive every month and must be paid. If it doesn't work properly, as when the owner is irascible, or the professionals are too distant from the human consequences of the process from which they derive their living, things can go awry.

Mark shifted in his chair. Sitting as he usually did irritated his shoulder. It was two o'clock already. As he thought about the history of the site investigation, he realized that apparently things *had* gone awry between the owner of the Convention Center site and the previous environmental company. Mark saw that little had been accomplished beyond removal of the tanks, excavation and landfilling of more than a thousand tons of deisel-contaminated soil, and the installation of a few monitoring wells installed with no discernible overall plan. The first round of groundwater samples hadn't turned up anything, which seemed remarkable to Mark, since upon removal of the tanks, the surrounding soils were contaminated in *every* case. Further, free product had been visible beneath each. It looked suspicious . . . very suspicious. The analytical laboratory that processed the samples was reputable, the same one Delta used. So how could the samples not be contaminated with groundwater at only 40 feet below the surface, more or less? Mark looked at the survey data for the monitoring wells, since Doug had told Jess he thought the groundwater gradient indicated on the previous company's site map was incorrect.

When a gradient turns out to be incorrect, meaning that the groundwater is said to be moving in such-and-such a direction, when it actually is flowing in a different direction, it usually means that either the surveyor screwed up, or there's a local geological feature skewing the data. Invariably, more wells are needed to determine the gradient accurately. Most surveyors did good work, but some were sloppy. Monitoring wells are just PVC plastic pipes, called *casings*, usually with either a 2-inch or 4-inch internal diameter. These PVC pipes are inserted into a borehole completed by a drill rig. First, the location is determined and the hole is drilled while the geologist completes the well log, indicating the type of soil or rock being penetrated during the drilling, and the depth at which each change in soil type is encountered. He is also careful to note the depth at which contact with the groundwater is made. This is not difficult, because the soil cuttings being pushed out the top during drilling suddenly become damp, then wet. Groundwater has been encountered.

When the hole is complete, which means that the deepest samples being brought up by the auger don't exude the smell of gasoline or diesel or whatever the contaminant is, the drilling is stopped, and the bottom of the hole is noted on the drill log. PVC pipe, which comes in ten or twenty foot lengths that can be screwed together to assemble a casing of any desired length, is inserted into the hole. One or more of the sections of casing will be "slotted," meaning that the factory made dozens of narrow, horizontal slices--cuts--all the way through the casing. The slots are placed very close together, one above the other, arranged in vertical rows around the casing. The "slot section" of the casing, usually five or ten feet in length, is placed such that when the casing is standing in the hole, half the open slots will be above the surface of the groundwater, and half beneath it. Groundwater can pass through the very narrow slots and enter the well, but sand grains cannot. The *annular space*, the empty area between the casing and the side of the bore hole, is filled with sand of a particle size slightly larger than the width of the slots cut in the casing, so, "duh," only water can enter the well. This sand is poured around the casing until it's filled the hole to within two feet or so of the surface of the ground. The remaining foot or two is filled with cement. After the cement dries, the excess casing left sticking up into the air above the ground is sawn off, and a cap is placed over the top of the open casing to prevent debris from falling into the completed well. The well is assigned a name, like MW-1 for the first monitoring well drilled and so forth, and the process is finished for that particular well.

Since the surface of the earth, the ground, is seldom perfectly flat, after the tops of the wells are cut off, it's seldom the same distance down to the groundwater when a measuring tape is lowered down inside the wells to measure the depth to the water table. This is of course partly because the groundwater is higher on one side of the property than the other . . . that's why it's *moving* (down gradient). More often than not, the topography varies across the site. If for example, there's a five-foot high hump in the middle of the property, the top of a well installed in the middle of the hump will be five feet farther up from the groundwater than the others. To determine the correct depth to the groundwater at any well location, the tops of the well casings must be professionally surveyed, so that the difference in elevation from the top of any well compared to other wells can either be added to or deducted from the *measured* depth to the groundwater. This makes it obvious that correct surveying is an absolute essential; otherwise, the data will appear unintelligible.

Mark removed the survey report from the file and examined it. It looked professional enough, so maybe the problem lay elsewhere. He looked at the clock. It was after four and time to leave for the day. Tonight was special, because he had promised Tim he would take him out for a hamburger, just him and Dad. He would talk with Doug tomorrow and see what had prompted his concerns.

Outside on the front porch, Doreen gave Tim a kiss on the cheek and a squeeze, and told him to have fun eating hamburgers with Dad. She gave Dad an even better kiss, and an even tighter squeeze.

“You two enjoy yourselves,” she said, “I’m making a supermarket run while you’re out. Do you need me to pick up anything special?”

“That Ben-Gay’s been working well at night, and I think it’s mostly used up. You could buy some more of that. Do we still have some ice-cream left?”

Doreen gave a smile that almost erupted into a laugh. Neither Mark nor she could credibly be called ice-cream “junkies,” but there was nothing that could ruin Mark’s day like a bowl of cheap ice-cream. Doreen was a master when it came to shopping, just like her mother. He was actually fond of his mother-in-law and her of him. Marie never learned to drive, and Doreen’s father always carted her everywhere. More than once, during a visit, he had made a point of telling Mark how much he hated waiting around a store while his wife shopped. Mark had sent him a copy of *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* the following Christmas.

Doreen actually complained about having to shop, but Mark suspected she was fibbing. She was always stashing away an entire case of this or that she had bought at a true bargain price. But when it came to ice-cream, she dropped her guard. It had to be the very best. Mark demanded that whole milk and cream be the first two ingredients. Of course, there were occasional bargains even among the different brands of gourmet-quality, ice-cream, and she rarely missed them. They both loved almonds too, from Smokehouse to the whole, unsalted ones. Mark *was* a junkie when it came to grapes: green grapes, red grapes, black grapes, seeded or seedless. It didn’t matter. He could pluck and consume a two-pound plastic mesh lot as they enjoyed a DVD movie in the evening after Tim had gone to bed. Sure, he’d pay for it later, but, what the hell?

“Any particular flavor?” she toyed.

“You decide. We’ll see you in a couple of hours. If one of those restocking clerks makes a pass at you, tell them you’ve got a jealous husband!”

“Don’t worry, handsome, I’ll let ‘em have it right in the old smackeroo!”

They laughed, then Mark and Tim walked down the sidewalk toward the car, Tim doing his best to take the same size steps as Dad.

They always made a private trip “for us *guys* only” to *Bob’s Old Fashioned Country Burgers* during the middle of the month. Mid-month was the time to plan the next Boy’s Night only two weeks away. Boy’s Night was serious business, and required the taste of their favorite old-fashioned hamburger to get them in the proper mood. Tonight, Tim had an idea he’d been “thinking about for some time” he said with great maturity and all the gravity of a 50-year-old:

“How about going to Mexico and buying some cool stuff, Dad?”

“Cool” and “Neat” were Tim’s favorite two adjectives these days.

“That sounds great, Tim, but don’t you think we should invite Mom along for a trip that special?”

Tim looked like he’d just seen his father’s face on one of the FBI wanted posters in the Post Office.

“She won’t care Dad . . . this is a Boy’s Night! No girls can come on Boy’s Night, not even Moms and Grandmas! You know that!”

Mark wondered for an instant what he had gotten himself into when he’d started the Boy’s Night tradition years ago. But a tradition’s a tradition, and Tim was growing more sophisticated every year. It was too late to cop out now.

“And we can stuff on cabrito and salsa, and bring a big bunch back to share with Mom,” Tim mused. “She loves barbecued baby goat as much as we. She’ll be so . . . oo happy when she finds out where we’re going!”

“Oh yes,” Mark said wryly, “she’ll be jubilant. I can see her face right now.”

As they settled with great commitment into their huge burgers and fries, there was the working out of the crucial details of this trip Tim had been thinking about “for some time.” After awhile, Mark became

aware that Tim's inexhaustible stream of constant conversation had actually stopped. There *was* a god. He was just sitting there, unconsciously stuffing fries into his face while staring at his Coke container without a word.

"Got a fly in your Coke?" Mark baited.

"Look, Dad, look at my straw; the Coke inside the straw is *higher* than the Coke in the cup outside the straw. How can it do that?"

Mark was pleased by the observation.

"That's caused by two different forces, piezometric effect and capillary attraction."

"Piezo and capillary *what?*"

"Now don't let simple words throw you! Look. Here's a kindergarten-level drawing. It's just a 4-inch wide tube and a 2-inch wide tube standing next to it. Simple enough?"

Insert Figure One Here

"Yeah . . ."

"Piezometric effect causes a liquid to stand higher in a narrow tube than inside a wide one. Most people don't know that. The narrower the tube, the higher it stands inside it than outside it; Notice that the water is higher in the skinny well than in the fat one?"

"Yeah." Tim said, looking at the drawing.

"But the water outside them is the same height. That's the Water Table underground!"

"Cool"

"Bingo! Now you can understand piezometric force! Those wells are piezometers we install at every site to find out how far down the water table is, and in which the direction the groundwater is flowing. It may only flow downgradient a few feet per year, or it could be moving several feet per month."

"Piezometers?"

"Yes. The other force is similar. Remember when the nurse at the hospital pricked the tip of your

finger and squeezed out a drop of blood, then touched the end of that teeny glass tube to the drop of blood?”

“That hurt! She squeezed too *hard*.”

“Yes, but remember how the blood just went inside that tiny little tube all by itself?”

“Yeah . . . I liked that!”

“Liquid will try to move up the sides a wide tube, too, like your cup, but can’t climb as far as it can in a teeny tube. Gravity won’t let it”

Tim leaned forward. He wanted to know why the Coke was higher inside that straw.

“Here’s your answer about the straw: the Coke is attracted to the plastic . . . you might say they like each other . . . like the blood liked the capillary tube. So it climbs up inside the straw higher than it does outside it.”

“That’s all there is to it?”

“Well, it’s a bit more complicated than that, but like your blood moved into the capillary tube in spite of gravity, the liquid moves higher inside a *narrow* tube like your straw than it does in a wide one like the Coke cup. It works the same way.”

“I’m keeping this straw to show Tommy; he doesn’t know about piezometers!”

Mark laughed; Tim was clutching the straw like a treasure map with satisfaction blanketing his countenance. They put their trash in the bins and returned home.

The Fax

Doreen punched the alarm. It was still dark outside. Time to get showered, dressed, wake and dress Tim, and have breakfast together. Then she would drop him off at school two blocks away and arrive at the Chronicle by 8:00 am. Tim could walk to school--he walked home--but since she passed it on her way, it had become a habit to drop him off. It was the time between the alarm and her first cup of coffee she enjoyed least. On weekends and holidays, Mark joined them for breakfast as a family, but during the week, his schedule was such that she awoke him with a cup of black coffee on her way out the door. This had been their routine for years. They often met for lunch if the logistics were suitable, and there was a golden rule that the family ate dinner together every evening--always.

When Mark was offered the position at Delta Geotechnical, they had relocated to Houston, the city of glass towers, especially the west side. They lived out in Katy the first couple of years; cheap rent, and an option to buy at rock bottom. After the Windfall Profits Tax, the economy in Houston collapsed, and there were vacant houses on almost every block. Soon after getting settled in, she applied to the Chronicle and was offered a position as a Copy editor. Her dream was to become a reporter, but opportunities were difficult and there was seldom an opening. She met often with Lou McCoy, Metro editor, expressing her desire. Eventually, he funneled a few mediocre assignments her way to see if she “had the grit,” as he liked to put it.

“In my opinion, being a reporter requires great character. A reporter without ethics is a menace to society.” Lou told her. “Read this article and tell me what’s wrong with it.”

Then he’d toss a copy of the paper to her, his comments written in the margins of the newsprint, errors of fact circled in red. This practice continued for some months. One afternoon, she pressed him particularly hard.

“Lou, I’m serious about being a reporter. Give me the chance, a tough assignment. I’ll prove I can do it.”

Lou stared at her with an almost sympathetic glance. Then he pulled a page from the Metro section

and handed it to her, pointing to a certain article.

“This is shit! Gurdjieff was right. With few exceptions, beginning reporters are immature scatter brains.”

“Gurdjieff?” Doreen inquired.

“Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. Have you read his *Meetings with Remarkable Men*?”

“I haven’t.” Lou walked to his bookshelf and pulled down a bright yellow paperback, holding it forth as though offering a great treasure.

“If you want me to trust you with a chance, read it, and pay attention to the Introduction. If you can convince me that your journalism will be above his remarks—and really mean it—I’ll give you a serious assignment, and we’ll go from there.”

She did read Gurdjieff and upon returning the book to Lou, swore that she would stand apart from the decrying attack on journalism Gurdjieff’s Persian had made. Lou kept his word and began giving her serious assignments. She performed so well that, rather than continuing the provisional status, he began to feel the risk of losing a very talented woman. He thus increased the importance of her assignments. Over time, she became daunting enough that he moved her into investigative journalism, where the really tough assignments are found.

That’s when their combined income allowed them to afford to move to *Woods*, a coveted, up-scale, gated community with pools, tennis courts, a baseball diamond, basketball courts, two clubhouses, and two pro golf courses weaving through the community. It was a place with facilities seldom used, because both the husband and wife usually had to work, just to afford the accouterments.

Doreen’s aunt was an avid, award-winning golfer and Doreen became drawn in by admiration at an early age. Mark had played a lot during his college days, but following an initial flurry after they first moved to *Woods*, their jobs became so demanding that they rarely found the time these days to hit the greens more than once or twice a month on a Sunday. They constantly reassured each other that it was just a temporary inconvenience.

She loved being an investigative reporter as much as Lou loved Butterscotch pudding. He was one of

those almost-sixty types who hadn't yet realized the days were passed when they could get away with a Porterhouse every night. In Lou's case, everyone else could tell just by looking at his gut, and the way one side of his white shirt was always out of his belt. No one presumed to suggest that he purchase shirts from the Big and Tall men's store which were long enough to span the distance around his middle, and have enough shirt left to tuck in properly. He was still living in the days when his hair was fiery red instead of mostly gray, and he still worked like he did. One thing he kept fine-tuned however was his healthy Irish temper, which made him a man to be reckoned with, as various individuals at the *Chronicle* had the misfortune of discovering from time to time.

This particular morning, she found a stickup note in the center of her chair back, asking her to see him as soon as she arrived.

"We received an interesting fax last night, and I think you should follow up on it," he had scribbled.

It had been written at her desk, because there were cigarette ashes on the floor. She felt about cigarettes like she felt about the smell of some of the ethnic bars she occasionally visited, investigating newsworthy incidents on the east side. After sweeping the ashes and tossing them into the trash basket by her desk, she went straight to Lou's office, finding the door wide-open.

"There she is," he said as she entered, "How's Mark?"

"He started back at Delta yesterday, and it's the happiest he's been for weeks."

"And Tim?"

"He's his usual, bubbling self. He's convinced Mark to drive them to Mexico next weekend."

"Are you going along?"

"Oh no! It's a Boy's Night," she said, smiling.

"That's quite a nice trip to miss out on, isn't it?" Lou mused.

"I could look at it that way, but I just consider it's two guys making their monthly cave trip."

"Cave trip?"

"Yes, you know," she said, "Men are from Mars, . . ."

". . . and women are from Venus," he finished her sentence. "Yes, I've read that. I don't know if I go

along with it. I guess it works for some people. Take a look at this."

He handed her a sheet of paper he'd been turning in his hands since she walked in. Doreen read it, then read it again. It was short and to the point.

The Convention Center deal is dirty. Gangley bought the critical two hold-out votes to get it passed by the City Council. They were paid \$250,000 in cash, each. The public should know.

That was it. Lou had circled the number of the sending fax at the top of the page.

"What do you think, Lou? Is there any truth to it?"

"Well, I'd believe it about Gangley. I know it was Merrill and Goshen who held out and the deal wouldn't have gone down without their having switched their votes. Merrill is as greedy a lawyer as I've ever met, so that's probably true. Goshen . . . I've got a problem with that. Reiny Goshen is a friend, and I've always thought of him as a man of integrity. You know, he used to be a news man?"

"Really? I'd never have guessed; he seems too detached to be a reporter, doesn't appear to be that strong. He's more of a team player."

"It was a very long time ago when he lived in Michigan . . . not a reporter, but very much a news man. Have you noticed he's always taking notes during council meetings? Hmm . . . I've got a problem believing Goshen could be corrupt. Maybe whoever this is just means Merrill and one of the later ones to change their mind . . . No, it couldn't be Goshen."

"Well, maybe you could ask him if he knows of anything shady about the deal."

"I wouldn't go that far. I don't think it's him, but I also wouldn't risk tipping off anyone about this lead. Of course, it's useless unless you can identify who sent it and get something more than an allegation. If not, it'll just have to be filed away for another day."

Doreen knew he would say that; she knew how careful Lou was.

"I'm about to shake the tree and see what falls out," she said, turning to leave.

"Oh, and Doreen . . ." he called after her, "you know to keep this between the two of us for a while?"

"Of course, Lou!"

Within an hour, she had run down the originating fax number. It belonged to a Mail Boxes, Inc. Clever; that meant there was no way of discovering who had sent it. But she called, hoping for a serendipitous break. They occasionally came along. A woman named, Claire told her that she only worked mornings, that "John" got in about 2:00 in the afternoon and closed the place at 8:00 pm. The time the fax was sent was 7:58 pm.. This person definitely didn't want to be discovered. She determined to visit John after dinner tonight. It was only about twenty minutes from *Woods*.

There was an artichoke feast that evening in the Houser home. Doreen's mother lived in central California near the coast and proudly shared the best artichoke dip recipe Mark had ever tasted. They maintained absolute loyalty to it. Tim was just as avid an artichoke fan as they were.

"Did you talk to Doug today? I know you were planning on it."

Mark leaned back, rubbing his stomach as a gesture of approval for the great dinner Doreen had made.

"Yes, I went straight to the site this morning and met him there. I had questions of my own after reviewing the file. The previous company incorrectly determined the groundwater gradient, and there . . . "

"I know all about groundwater gradients, mom!" Tim blurted out, "Dad taught me how to do that last night, right dad?"

"Right, Tim, and I'm sure you would have done a better job than they did. Besides, there are some other problems too: anomalous lab results, too few monitoring wells. They were on that site for almost a month, yet when they left, they never submitted so much as a one-page report to the case officer. I don't know how they got away with that, but I've designed a new piezometer grid. One of the things they did was use four-inch casing for two of the piezometers, but only a one and one-half inch for the third one. You just don't do that. Groundwater will stand higher in the narrow well than in the other two. After you measure the depth down to the water table, it could give the impression that the groundwater was flowing in the opposite direction."

"How would it do that?" Doreen asked.

Tim's ears had seemed to grow larger when the word, *piezometer*, came up.

"Water stands higher in a 2-inch diameter well than in a 4-inch. Even if only two feet apart, the water would be a couple of inches higher in the 2-inch, maybe more. No geologist would fail to know that, unless he was green or a wood-head. But Clarke, the first consultant, installed one and a half-inch tubing, which magnifies the effect even *more*. Suppose there's only a half inch difference in groundwater elevation between the peizometer at the end of the site where the release occurred, and the one farthest down gradient. If they just took the depth to water, the groundwater elevation in the one and a half-inch well which was actually *down* gradient would be higher than in the four-inch one which actually was *up* gradient. They would contour the groundwater moving in the wrong direction. So I just ordered another series, and I gave the responsibility to Doug. He's thorough, and he doesn't make mistakes, not that serious. The water sample results from the last company all came back clean, but I don't see how they could, because you can just stand in the general area and smell the contamination. It's not like it's diesel that sticks to the soil. We're talking BTEX in gasoline and dry-cleaning chemicals, both of which are highly soluble in groundwater. We found them in our first round of new samples. The concentrations came back sky high. There are lots of unanswered questions about the work Clarke Environmental did there."

"Would it surprise you if I told you that Lou assigned me to follow up on a possible story *concerning* the Convention Center deal?" Doreen asked.

"*You're kidding!* Does he know I'm working on the project?"

"No, and I didn't mention it. He might have given it to someone else on the basis of conflict of interest. In fact, I have to leave you sweeties for an hour or so to talk to a man about twenty minutes from here. I hope you don't mind?"

Mark shook his head, "No." He hardly heard her ask. He was so deep in thought about the possible implications of owner corruption on the one hand, and site data that appeared to have been deliberately manipulated by Clarke Environmental on the other.

"*I wonder . . .*" He muttered.

"I'll see you when I return," Doreen was saying.

The place was open, and sure enough, a "John Quince" was on the job when she inquired. The

janitorial service was already scurrying about, cleaning in the back, and a clerk was busy restocking paper in the copiers.

"Hi, I'm Doreen Houser from the Chronicle, and I need to ask you a few questions about an individual who was in your store late last night, probably the last customer you saw. He or she sent a fax from your machine to our newspaper, and we couldn't make it out very well, so I need to talk to them about what it said."

John gave no reaction indicating he felt anything negative and certainly didn't feel threatened himself. He stood quietly, his chin in his hand, rubbing his beard, as if deep in thought.

"The last person in, huh?"

"Yes, the fax was sent at 7:58 p.m., just two minutes before you closed."

John suddenly looked up, a little embarrassed.

"What?" Doreen asked, anticipating information.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I already *had* closed. You know, had the key in the lock and turned. Nobody hardly ever comes at the last-minute. But this lady made eye contact with me and started pointing at her watch and beating on the door. You see, this big clock on the wall here was in full view of me and her, so I decided to let her in."

"So, it was a woman?"

"Yeah, kind of attractive woman. But once she was inside, she acted like she didn't want me to even look at her, you know, head down, never looking you in the eye. But I got a good look at her. After all, I was nice enough to let her in. I wasn't intending to bother her, or anything like that."

"What was she wearing? What did she look like?"

"Jeans and a sweater. Maybe thirty-five to forty, but not wrinkled up or anything. Actually, she had on makeup and looked pretty good for her age, not fat or anything like that, you know."

"Was she wearing a ring?"

"Goodness, I don't think I would even have noticed something like that. I'm married, you know, so I wouldn't notice anything like that."

"*This guy isn't all that bright,*" Doreen thought to herself, "How tall was she? Was she as tall as you?"

"Uh, well, maybe just almost as tall as me. I'm 5 feet, 8 inches tall, you know."

"Not as tall as you? So, she was about five, seven?"

"Probably, something like that. She had red hair."

"She did? What shade? I mean, was it bright red or dark red?"

"Oh, bright red, and lots of curls. She has it cut short, you know."

"That's good. Your memory is coming back."

"Yes, and she wore real red high heels, the kind with little bitty tips on them. And she wore black stockings."

"I thought you said she was wearing *jeans*. How could you see her stockings?"

"Well, they *were* jeans, but they only went to like, you know, the middle of her legs, her lower legs."

"I see. What color were the jeans and the sweater?"

"They were normal blue, you know. The sweater was red, but not the same color as her hair."

"A redhead with red heels and a red sweater. That's a weird combination," she thought.

"That's pretty much all I can remember," he said, "Does it help?"

"Oh, yes, very much. Listen, John, here's my card. If she happens to come in again, will you call me on my cellular immediately, and just say something like, 'Doreen, how are you? It's John?' Could you do that? I would appreciate it!"

"Sure; glad to be of help, you know."

Doreen shook his hand and left.

"A redhead between 35 and 40, with a not-too-sophisticated taste in clothing," she rehearsed to herself.

Halfway home, her cellular rang. She answered, and a familiar voice said very nervously,

"Doreen, how are you? It's John."

"She's there *now*? In your store?"

"Uh huh, well I'd better go. I've got a customer. Bye now."

Doreen stopped so abruptly that she skidded into the curb. Turning around, she drove as fast as she felt was safe trying to get back. It should only take about eight or nine minutes. What a break! She was there in eight minutes, slowed down as much as possible without looking suspicious, and rode past the storefront very slowly. The woman was still there, paying John. She pulled over and stopped, leaving the engine on, but she turned the headlights off. She waited. A moment or so later, the woman emerged, entered a Cadillac parked almost directly in front of the store, and began driving. Doreen ducked as she passed her, then sat up. She didn't want to be obvious or the woman might spot her. If she didn't know she was being followed, she might lead her right to her home. As Doreen started to pull out, she heard a loud screech of brakes and stopped immediately. Another car almost hit her. Why hadn't she noticed it?

"Watch it, bitch!" A sinister voice shouted.

She realized why she hadn't seen the car. *Its* lights weren't on. Now, she was nervous. That car was driving slowly, and if she passed it, the mean man might think she was putting him down in some way.

"How can I get around him," she wondered, *"I can't lose this woman."*

The redhead's car was in full view not that far ahead, so she would just wait for the guy to turn somewhere, then close the distance. It occurred to her that, actually, he was a shield. The woman wouldn't even see her car until the other moved away. She took care to keep a respectable distance behind the mean man, just the same. Why would he drive at night, knowing his lights were out? How stupid! He must be drunk. It made sense. Eventually, she followed her all of the way to Clinton, where she turned east toward Galena Park.

This was weird. Every time the woman turned, the car in front of Doreen turned too.

"Bum luck," she thought, passing Loop 610, waiting for him to turn off somewhere. He made her nervous. The guy was driving an old green Dodge, a model from the '70s. The right rear was smashed in. That was probably what took out the light circuit. But suddenly, she noticed his lights were all *on*.

"Maybe it wasn't about being stupid," she began to think after the woman made another turn, and the man followed her. *Following her?*

"Oh, my god. That's exactly what he's doing. That's why he had his lights off until they blended with

heavier traffic . . . so she wouldn't notice his car"

But if that were true, what must he be thinking she, *Doreen*, was doing following *him*? Suddenly, she grew frightened. She reached for her purse, pulling out a pen, and jotted down the number on the license plate. She was losing her nerve. What if he had a gun or something? What if he took a shot at her? What if . . . ? She turned at the next block, leaving the cars moving ahead. It was too nerve-wracking. She turned left again at the next block, back toward Clinton at the next, and began again to look for them. She couldn't spot either in the traffic, so she steadily speeded up, expecting to catch up with them soon, but traffic was heavy. Somewhere after Loop 610, she had turned off. They must have turned into Galena Park during her maneuver off of Clinton, and back! *Damn!*

"You were gone quite a while. I was beginning to get worried," Mark said as she walked into the den. Mark and Tim were watching a football game, one of their favorite Martian activities. "You look shaken. What's happened, Honey?"

He stood, and walked to Doreen.

"*God, hon., have you been crying?*"

She put her arms around him, and held on, especially tight.

"I just got a bad scare a little while ago. I'm all right now, but hold me for a minute, okay?"

"You poor *thing*," Mark said, sitting her down next to him, holding her. He didn't ask anything else.

She'd tell him after she calmed down.

"Would you get me a beer?"

"Of course, I'll be right back."

Later, after Tim was in bed, she told him everything. Mark listened intently, without comment.

"*This is like a movie*," he thought to himself, "*a real mystery story.*"

"There will be a fax in Lou's office tomorrow morning," Doreen said, "I'd *bet* on it. I'm anxious to see what it says."

"We'd better sleep on it. You've been through an ordeal, and it shows. Why don't we go to bed?"

They laid close, Mark holding her, her nose buried in the soft hair of his chest. The curve of the side

of her body was against him, the soft skin silky in the near darkness.

"What a woman," he thought.

During lingering shoulder problems, the Sportster had gathered dust, an affront to any Harley man worth his leather. Mark had missed warm wind against his face and the soothing thunder as the ribbon of highway unrolled. Blue sky and a dazzling, Texas sun enhanced his ride west, the zephyr tossing his brown hair. He rehearsed his questions for Clarence Wilkes: Why had Clarke excavated virtual craters, massive volumes, across much of the Convention Center site? Only a fraction of that amount had been contaminated even in the immediate areas of the diesel leaks. Why inch-and-a-half diameter casings down gradient and four-inch piezos *up* gradient, behind the release? It just wasn't possible Clarke's *Principal* Hydrogeologist was ignorant of the illusion that would result when they measured the depth to groundwater in those wells. It had to be a deliberate attempt to subvert the State-mandated investigation by making groundwater to appear to slope in the *opposite* direction. The sample results would come back free of contamination. Of course. They were from clean wells! Clearly, the impetus was to elude the cost and delay of a cleanup. He'd figured out Clarke's motive for that one. It was corrupt, unforgivable for any environmental scientist. But why the craters?

Downshifting, Mark leaned to the right and rolled the Sportster into the parking area fronting *Mick's Sports Bar*. Hearing a Harley, students from the college across the way turned their heads to leer. It was irresistible. Mick's was jammed. Frenzied shouts and curses from Oilers fans hovering in front of giant screens stood out above a hundred conversations. He scanned for Clarence.

Wilkes was an envious geologist. He couldn't stand working for beans at the state as a case officer when his counterparts working as consultants in industry firms were knocking down big dollars. Most geologists aimed at industry unless they had mediocre GPAs or craved the security of a bureaucracy. State Case Officer jobs attracted science majors with degrees in biology or another cognate science. Consequently, they tended to be weak in geology--almost by definition-- especially hydrogeology. They often misunderstood one or more technical aspects of consultant proposals. Yet one had to treat them with a degree of deference because they nonetheless wielded the power of the state. This irony made for interesting cat-and-

mouse relationships between consultants and case officers.

Mark and Clarence had become friends when he worked as a case officer, because Clarence *was* a geologist. He confided during a discussion of one of Mark's work plans that he was leaving his state regulatory career to join Clarke Environmental, because he couldn't get anywhere on state pay.

"You won't be the first, but there's one factor you should consider before making that leap," Mark had cautioned.

"What factor?"

"Often, the shock of the industry workload is too much for regulatory minded individuals, and they end up going back. They like the short hours, extra holidays, and relative ease of state employment."

"I'm different."

Clarence *was* different. He had been a year with Clarke and showed no signs of regret. The payments on his new Corvette would have precluded a low salary again at any rate. Today's meeting was arranged when Mark contacted him a few days before and invited him to meet for wings and pizza at *Mick's*, their favorite haunt in the past.

"We'll get caught up, Clarence."

"I'd sure as hell enjoy that, Mark. Count me in!" Clarence said.

"Good, I'll see you then. I also have a few questions about the Convention Center site data we inherited from Clarke I'd like to ask you about."

"I'll look forward to noon, Thursday!"

Mark thought he had detected an unmistakable thread of suspicion in Clarence's voice when he mentioned questions about the Convention Center data. Clarence knew something, and Mark wondered what.

As he glanced around the crowd watching the Oiler's game, he could barely hear Clarence calling out above the high-spirited crowd.

"Over here, Mark!" He'd gotten a pitcher of Miller Light earlier, and was already relaxed. He'd also been lucky enough to secure one of the high round tables where they used to perch. They shook hands, smiling at the hysterics of the sports huddle.

“No fair,” Mark retorted, dragging one of the high-backed stools from an adjacent table, “you got a head start.”

“Pour yourself a mug, Bro.,” he said, an unfiltered Camel dangling from one side of his lips, “It’s good, and it’s cold! I *heard* you pulling into the lot before I saw you. I’m surprised to see you riding again so soon. How’s that shoulder?”

“It still bothers me--a lot. I only rode fifteen miles, and it’s throbbing right now. I have to recondition it for biking. Sometimes, it seems out of whack in some way, but the doctors tell me the x-rays are normal.”

“If they say it looks normal, why do think it’s out-of-whack?”

“I happened to be lifting some boards the other day while I was cleaning the garage. All of a sudden, without warning, my hand just let go and a surge of pain shot down my arm. It was the craziest thing, because I had no control over it.”

“So I take it, your saying it wasn’t that your fingers slipped. Your arm just ‘turned off,’ so to speak?”

“Yes. That’s exactly it. The rest of the time, it’s completely normal. It has me buffaloed.”

“Sorry to hear that, Buddy,” Clarence said, sympathetic, “I know how much you love that Harley. Isn’t it taking a risk riding it if at any moment, your hand could let go?”

“I’m assuming it’s a freak thing, and just needs to be worked out by use. But you’re right.” Clarence didn’t reply immediately, considering Mark’s response.

“When I stop,” Mark continued, “I nudge it into neutral. If I was in gear, holding the clutch in and it happened at just the wrong moment . . . “

”You could be thrown like riding a two-wheeled bronc . . . You’ll be all right. Like you said, you just need conditioning.”

“Thanks for your concern, Clarence, *and* the advice, *and* the beer! I’ll get the grub.”

“Clarence laughed. “Yeah, I’ve missed the hot victuals here, the girls and the wings!”

Mark motioned for the waitress and ordered the platter of Hot & Spicy Buffalo wings.

“So how’s the job with Clarke going? I saw from the shine on your ‘Vette, you’ve got enough left over after the payment to buy wax.”

“Cute,” Clarence said, “Very cute! I see the accident didn’t affect your sense of humor.”

Mark laughed. “It’s looking good, as deep as hand-rubbed, laquer.”

“No brighter than your Harley. Sure your shoulder’s not throbbing from polishing it?”

“Could be.”

“I’ve wanted a *Vette* since I could pronounce the word. Like a Harley, owning one isn’t just a statement; it changes how others relate to you in interesting ways.”

“The wine-red finish, and that reworked, leather interior. Wow! That had to set you back.”

“It wasn’t as much as you’d think. I took it south of the border. That leather’s fresh, thick by comparison to the thin stuff you normally see in sports cars. It really is hand-rubbed. You should *smell* that interior!”

“Good for you, Clarence. You’ve made the jump from state to industry, regulator to consultant!”

“I’m still jumping. I was jumped three times last week.”

“Low battery? Cops?”

“Hell, no! Being single, I’ve plenty of money now. Everything in that car is in top condition. It wasn’t cops, either. I bought a radar detector that’s advertised to detect them before they detect me. So far, it’s lived up to the claims, by only a hair’s breadth a couple of times.”

“The new thing is a laser beam, so I’d watch it.”

“No, I was referring to women.” Clarence chuckled.

“Women?” Mark had a blank expression.

“You asked me what I meant by *jump*.”

“Oh,” Mark laughed, “I get it! . . . *three* times?”

“Like magic . . . “

Clarence paused, “Ma’am, could you bring us another pitcher--*Miller Draft*? I never saw anything like it, Mark. I always knew women liked sports cars and bikes same as men, but good grief! I had no hint about the *effect*. I take a gal out, and the next thing, I’m in bed with her. I’m forty, and I get all I want, young ones, too. They’re very different from the girls I grew up with,” he said, lighting another Camel.

“Maybe not *that* different,” Mark said, “I recall pregnant girls dropping out of High School, and usually, one of the athletes or popular boys with hopped-up cars was involved. Girls probably aren’t that much different, just more honest, like nipple rings and tattooed ankles.”

“It’s more than that, though. I read, or heard on a talk show that Vettes are Freudian symbols, and I think that has a lot to do with it. You know what I’m talking about. It’s the same with Harleys.”

“Oh yes. Freud aside, Doreen and I have made some interesting use of the seat on my bike!”

Clarence laughed, “Yeah, like trying to get it on in a Vette!”

“I hope you’re using protection. Even those young girls could be HIV positive. You have to be careful, and you darn sure don’t want a paternity suit, even with an industry salary.”

“Usually, I don’t need protection.” He leaned closer to Mark’s ear. “I find, if I very gently push down on the back of their heads after we make out a while, most of them don’t resist, especially if we’ve had some refreshment first. If I put it in their face, what else are they going to do when that moment comes?”

“You’re a menace, Clarence,” Mark said, laughing, “like Phantom of the Opera; they can’t resist the Vette villain’s will!”

“So, are you and Doreen still getting along well?”

“She’s great. And with Doreen, I don’t need anything else.”

“You never miss strange?”

The server arrived with an enormous platter heaped high with steaming wings, the second pitcher and two fresh frozen mugs.

“Put your money away, Mark. Today’s on me! That way, we’ll have to do this again soon, cause you’ll owe me.”

“Thanks for the tip,” she said to Clarence. Then she turned her head, smiling at Mark.

“Take her, for instance,” Clarence said as she walked away, “She’s cute, strange, and was enamored with you. Doesn’t that make you itch just a little?” He began attacking the wings.

“Not in the least,” Mark replied, joining the feast, “To be really honest, Clarence, I never did like the idea of being a bachelor playboy. It’s such a predator on time and energy. Frankly, I’d be depressed with your

lifestyle. No offense, but it's too lonely for me. Having a passionate wife who's also your best friend is my favorite lifestyle. Harley or not, I guess I'm traditional in some ways."

"That's okay if you can find it, but most marriages don't last. You just end up with a wench after your paycheck and a bunch of kids to support that you never see. Besides, it's boring in bed after a while."

"That's bleak, Clarence! There are a lot of good women out there. *I'm* not bored."

"Most men are. That's why they're *out* for strange."

"I think it's more complicated than that. I've been close to several breakups where another woman was involved. Some fellows are just jerks, but sometimes the guy wasn't getting his fantasies fulfilled by his wife. That's unfortunate, but it's still the guy's fault. He can fairly well predict that kind of problem by getting to know her before buying a ring. If there are going to be boundary conditions he can find a gal who isn't hung up."

"Unless she lies, or turns out to be a disagreeable, moody bitch that turns him off."

"I'm lucky, I guess. I also have a wonderful son I wouldn't give up for anything."

"I want to find someone like Doreen someday, Mark, but for the moment, I'm loving it."

"Hell, some gal's going to snare you like a rabbit in that Vette. You're a straight-up fellow. She'll steal your heart."

Clarence put out his cigarette, looking at it blankly, as if distracted by thought.

"Isn't life great Mark? We're friends, we both have what we want, and we're enjoying beer and wings at *Mick's!*"

"Yes, it is. It never seemed more precious than it did when I realized an accident was unavoidable. I remember wondering if that was it, if my ticket was about to be punched."

"I wondered about that, what must have flashed in front of you."

"Just Doreen and Tim's faces. That was it."

"Sheesh!"

With the wings gone, Mark decided this was the opportune moment to address the questions which prompted the meeting. He opened the folder he had laid to the side after arriving.

“Clarence, I brought these data from the office. Contrast your groundwater gradient with mine.”

Clarence examined the two site plans in silence, but Mark noticed the skin on his face and neck turning red. Momentarily, he blurted out,

“I had nothing personally to do with that charade, Mark.”

“How could you not be aware of it? Come on, Clarence, level with me . . . off the record. It’s important for me to know.”

“How much do you *think* you know?”

“I know no hydrogeologist could accidentally design a piezometric well grid that gives the impression the groundwater is flowing in the opposite direction from what it really is; not unless his degree has *Podunk University* across the top! He’d have to be a dumb shit, and Clarke doesn’t run that kind of operation. We both know that. It was deliberate. When I looked at the site, I asked myself ‘*why?*’. . . and worse yet, why would anyone misdirect the installation of monitoring wells at a thousand dollars each in the wrong direction . . . *up* gradient, behind the release? Have a look at my little detective drawing.

Insert Figure Two here

Do you see the water standing higher in the 2-inch well than in the 4-inch right next to it? Really basic hydrogeology, Clarence, wouldn’t you agree?”

“My degree doesn’t say *Podunk University*, as you well know, Mark! But frankly, your recognition of that ruse is prescient. I doubt there are that many hydrogeologists who think in terms of forces and chemistry from day to day. Things get routine.”

“Notice the line pointing to the 4-inch well I drew next to the 2-inch? By drawing the dotted waterline from the top of the water in the 2-inch to the top of the water in the 4-inch on the left side, you tilt the water in the wrong direction. If you had a 4-inch instead of a 2-inch, it would tilt in the correct one, the dashed line!”

“I get it, Mark! Once you point it out, well . . . of course. But it’s still prescience. So, tell me, what

reason for this clever, not-so-obvious trick did you come up with?”

“There are only two possibilities if we rule out the *Podunk U.* geologist: Either the consultant is trying to run a big tab on the client by wasting time in the wrong direction before “discovering” the correct one, necessitating another battery of monitoring wells and more billed hours of his time, *or*; and this is where my nose is sniffing: he doesn’t want to document the dimensions of the plume; he’s trying *not* to find it when he *knows* it’s there! When they pulled the tanks, Free Product was standing in pools in the bottom for Christ’s sake, and *oozing from the walls* of the excavations! When you see that, you know good ‘n well it *must* have soaked down to the groundwater unless it’s way down there, and it’s not at that site. The depth to water is just forty feet! Clarke wouldn’t allow his professionals to generate fees dishonestly by doing the former, so why would he place wells *up slope* from the contamination, *knowing* he wouldn’t encounter it, because the contaminated groundwater is flowing down slope in the opposite direction?”

“Yeah, that *is* a problem, isn’t it?” Clarence said, being coy.

“So he must have taken a bribe from Ganglely, been *paid* not to find groundwater contamination, or to dramatically minimize it. That way, the clean up would be limited to excavation of the contaminated soils, which they did immediately after pulling the tanks. There’s no other conclusion in this instance. That’s why I called you, Clarence.”

Clarence stared at Mark in silence for a moment. Mark knew he was weighing the odds of losing his job against lying to a friend.

“It’s strictly between us. I’m not even noting it, but I need to know for other reasons so I can do my job correctly, with as little mystery as possible.”

“This has to stay off the record,” Clarence said, “I *mean* that! If you use the information in a way that damages Clarke, I’ll never forgive you. He’s a good man, one of the best.”

“My lips are sealed. Bring me into the loop.”

“I was sitting in my cubicle a couple of months ago; you know how they all open toward the center, and Clarke’s office is in full view on the other side, glass-walled. If he wants privacy, he has to close about five sets of blinds, which he almost never does.”

“I know the layout. What about it?”

“I’d never heard of Gangley. At least I don’t remember having heard of him until that day when he walked into Clarke Environmental. Here was this biker dude, I mean right out of the movies, man, and he had two huge men with him, bodyguards I guess, each carrying an upscale bag that look something like a flight bag.”

“Why had they come? What were they there, for?”

“I had no idea, not at first. When Clarke saw them, he appeared to recognize Gangley; he came out and they shook hands. Apparently, Clarke had spoken to him previously when Gangley called, asking for an appointment. He didn’t seem surprised to see him, no disgruntled expression or other negative reaction.”

Clarence poured himself and Mark another mug, and lit another Camel.

“Okay, so then what happened?”

“Clarke took them into his office, and . . . check this out: Gangley’s thugs--that *is* what they looked like--*they* began closing all of the blinds. That was weird! Everyone else in the open area traded expressions too. I wasn’t the only one who thought it was awkward. They were in there for over an hour, and when they left, the two sidekicks didn’t have the bags with them. Gangley and Clarke were talking and laughing like brothers or best friends, and after Gangley left, Clarke announced loudly, ‘We just picked up the Convention Center project!’

“Everyone cheered, and soon we were out there on site, doing our thing. Clarke took care of that deal personally though, something I haven’t seen him do before, but I assumed it was because it was such a huge project and he didn’t want any mistakes. Later, he gave Razorback--we call him that, cause he’s from Arkansas--a site map *limiting* the number of monitoring wells to install, and marking the exact locations and even the monitoring well designs. That’s also unusual. Monitoring well design is so standard.”

“What about those huge pits to groundwater all over the site spanning broad areas where there clearly were no indications of contamination? What was their reason for that? Was it a backfill source for later use during construction, or what?”

“I honestly have no idea, except that it was during those excavations that something started troubling

Clarke. We got the groundwater gradient map completed with the *reversed* gradient as you know, but it wasn't apparent to anyone at the time. In retrospect, it should have been obvious. Then suddenly, Clarke comes in one morning and announces that we are to turn in all materials related to the Convention Center, I mean down to copying the computer files, turning them into him, and ordering that we erase them from our systems. That was the big giveaway that something very unusual was going down . . . *another pitcher, please,*" he shouted to the waitress.

"I don't need any more. The reason I've downed so much this early is that I don't have to return to the office. But you're going back, aren't you?"

"I don't know. This is upsetting stuff to dredge up, and I'm getting the feeling I should never have agreed to this meeting. Sorry to say that, but this could ruin Clarke and affect everyone on the payroll."

"I like the hell out of you, Clarence. I don't know how to increase your comfort level except to say that you have my word of honor, *genuinely!* If I know what happened, it's better, because I won't be poking around. That could cause problems."

"Yeah . . . you're right, I guess." He lit another Camel before finishing the one he was smoking.

"You really are rattled, aren't you," Mark said. "Why do you think Clarke backed out?"

"Conscience; I know it for a fact."

"How?"

"Because the next day after he called in all of the work materials, Gangley came back to the offices, and he looked *very* angry."

"Did he have the two guys with him?"

"No, he was alone. He went marching into Clarke's office unannounced, but Clarke didn't seem all that surprised. There was an exchange, under their breath at first, but it grew louder. Then, right in front of the entire office, with the blinds wide open, Clarke handed those two carry bags I mentioned earlier back to Gangley. I supposed it was the *site* materials . . . but Gangley wouldn't take them! He shouted something, I mean, *shouted*, then turned to walk out. Without warning, Clarke abruptly threw one of the bags at him from behind . . . threw it *hard*. It almost knocked Gangley off his feet! When he recovered, he grabbed it to use as

a shield, because Clarke had a firm grip on the other one and was about to smack him with *it*.”

“That must have been some dramatic shit!”

“You have no idea, but of course, not a person in the office was looking directly at them as of that point. They were afraid Gangley might come after *them* on the way out, if he spotted them leering.”

“Heavy stuff . . . go on”

“Well, have you every seen two grown, angry men swinging heavy leather-canvass bags, like they mean to kill with them? It’s frightening! I panicked. Everyone was in a state of panic. Some of us were wondering if we shouldn’t jump Gangley, but Clarke had started it by hurting him with that bag to the back, so . . . what to do, right?”

To keep Clarence from getting distracted, Mark handed the server the cost plus tip for the pitcher as she arrived with two new mugs, and reneged on not drinking any more draft. His blood pressure was up listening to Clarence’s tale. The fog from a continuous string of Camels was irritating, but he was willing to pay the price for the gems escaping Clarence’s lips along with the smoke. Clarence stood, excusing himself to the Men’s room. Mark thought he sensed him wavering a bit. He pondered the drama just shared. This was the type of interview *Doreen* would have liked to conduct. Clarence returned almost immediately, his face flushed.

“Are you sure you didn’t get this plot from a suspense novel?” Mark asked. “It’s gripping.”

“Swear to God, every word’s true, even the part I’m *about* to tell you,” he said, climbing back onto his stool, “They were smacking those bags with tremendous force, when all of a sudden, Clarke’s ripped . . . and hundreds or thousands of bills went flying all over the place. I’m talking *hundred-dollar* bills, here!”

“Wow!”

“When it broke, Clarke paused just long enough to look through the glass at the rest of us, and Gangley caught him upside the head, knocking him to the floor. Then he threw the bag down on him, and as he left, slammed the door so hard the glass broke, sending shards all over the place. While he was exiting, not an eye looked directly at him. Everyone was terrified! As soon as he was out the front, one of the girls ran over to the door to see if Clarke was all right.”

“Was he?”

“Apparently, because he was standing back up, but he told her to ‘get the fuck out,’ and began closing all of the blinds. No one else *dared* to approach *that* door. I certainly wouldn’t have! The side of his face was swelling. I saw that much.”

“What did he say when he came out?”

“He didn’t. I guess he was embarrassed. He was still in there when the last person left for the evening. The next day, he didn’t come in until three in the afternoon. Some Door company showed up during the morning and replaced the door. That was it. That’s all I know.”

“And he never said *anything* about it?”

“He didn’t, and no one ever dared mention it again. The next thing I knew, I heard you guys had the project, so I figured Jess was offered the carry bags next.”

“No way! Jess isn’t like that. He wouldn’t take a bribe from Gangley or anyone else. He built *Delta* brick-by-brick, and he wouldn’t let anyone tear it down. Second, I’m doing a *standard* site investigation, and he hasn’t hinted at varying it in any way. I guess Gangley just dropped one of the balls he was juggling, a big one.”

Rising to leave, Mark assured him their discussion would never be disclosed with Clarence’s name attached to it, or in a manner that would disparage Clarke Environmental. He thanked him for the information.

“Just the same,” Clarence warned, “You be real careful if Gangley’s around. That man is dangerous, and he’s got the bucks to grind his way to wherever he wants. I’m serious, Mark, don’t take any of this lightly.”

“I’m totally sensitized, Clarence. Thanks again.”

“Sure, and, *Boy*, it’s good to see you on your feet again after that horrible accident. You’re lucky to be alive.”

“Thanks, Clarence, I’m taking off now. I have the information I needed.”

“Aren’t you going to help empty this pitcher?” Clarence asked, lighting his eighth Camel.

“I don’t think so, but thanks!”

They shook hands, and Mark watched Clarence pour another mug as he stopped off at the Men’s himself. When he came out, instead of leaving, he returned to the table.

“Forget something? Got another question?”

“No, my friend, but I thought of a conversation I overheard outside the mall while waiting on Doreen to pick up a Lay-away some time ago. It came to mind while I was in the Men’s room.”

“What was it?”

“I don’t think you’ll be offended. I’d hate to see anything untoward happen.”

“What’s on your mind?”

“While I was waiting on her, there were some young girls sitting on the steps talking, three of them, I think. I was behind them sitting on a bench and they didn’t realize I was there.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, one of them, a ’large’ girl, was saying something to the other two about having gotten genital warts in her mouth!”

“You’re shiting me, now.”

“No, I’m not. What if *she* gave you head? You could end up with warts on your sausage! That would seriously dampen your lifestyle. It’s just something to think about, that’s all. I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah, take care of yourself.” Clarence said.

Mark could tell from his expression and the silence that followed that Clarence would be preoccupied with that prospect for a while. He could imagine him pulling a magnifying glass and flashlight out of the glove compartment in the heat of passion, and asking a girl to open her mouth for a close inspection before nudging her head down! He laughed til it hurt.

The Strategy

Without stopping by her office first, Doreen walked straight to Lou's, holding her breath in anticipation. She was certain Lou would be sitting there with a second fax. Her heart throbbed to know what it contained. She wasn't disappointed.

"Good morning! You got my message, I see," Lou said.

"Actually, I haven't been to my office yet. I knew there would be another fax; that's why I'm an hour early. I didn't think you'd be in yet."

"You'd have to get up very early to arrive before me; I'm up with the roosters! How did you know there would be another fax, Woman's intuition?"

"No, I saw her sending it!"

"You what . . . *her* . . . what are you telling me. Do you also know what's in it?"

"No, but I can't wait to see."

"Well, go ahead and read it; then I want the long version."

"She grabbed it anxiously, and read:

You didn't put it in the paper. This is bigger than you think, and it's true. Here's more: The mayor was paid *half a million* in cash by Gangle. *Now* will you do a story? Where's your public conscience?

Looking up, she realized she and Lou were staring at each other in disbelief.

"You believe this lady?" She asked. "She obviously knows nothing about how the newspaper business functions and even less about Investigative reporting."

"Right now, I'm more interested in knowing how you know it *is* a lady."

"An unbelievable run of luck, Lou. Last night after dinner, I left Mark and Tim at home to run over to the Mail Boxes, Inc. place we traced from the number on the first fax. It's less than half an hour from *Woods*. I wanted to talk to the evening shift fellow, John Quince. When I arrived, he remembered the last person there

night before last because he had locked the front door a few minutes early, thinking no one else would be coming. She stood outside banging, pointing to her watch, so he had to unlock the door again to let her in. You wouldn't forget someone you met under those circumstances. It turns out, she's a thirty-five to forty-year-old; a redhead who doesn't know the first thing about dressing even though she drives a nice Cadillac."

"He knew *that*?"

"No, but I'll get to how *I* know."

Doreen related the entire series of events the previous evening as Lou listened in amazement.

"My, you're the luckiest reporter," he said as she concluded, "and you're probably fortunate you turned off when you did. Whoever he was, he was certainly tailing the lady. If she's being watched, she's potentially in danger, perhaps *physical* danger."

"That means we have to find her somehow, but not push her further into harms way doing so."

"I've got an idea," Lou mused, "We know she's watching the paper, because she was upset that her fax tip didn't trigger a story. She probably expected to find it on the front page. We also know that she'll be looking in the paper this evening, hoping to see it."

"So, where does that leave us?" Doreen asked.

"Suppose we put a little message surrounded by a border right in the lower left or right corner of the front page which invites her to contact us?"

"You mean something like,

Dear redheaded Fax Friend. Need to speak with you confidentially before we can run the story. Will protect your identity. Please call Doreen or Lou at 555-1446?,

Doreen asked.

"Yeah." Lou said, "that wording will do, except I'd leave out *redheaded*. You're telling her we know what she looks like."

"True," Doreen agreed. "We can get in the Late Edition."

“Are you sure of that?”

“*Lou . . . ouu*, I was a copy editor, remember?”

Lou laughed, “Guess I can’t see you as anything but an investigative reporter any longer.”

“I’m on it!” Doreen said, darting out.

Lou sat reflecting upon the previous night’s drama.

“*Isn’t that something*,” he thought to himself? They had grown so involved in that redhead, they had never discussed the implications of the mayor taking a \$500,000 dollar bribe!

“*Hell, this is getting damned exciting*.”

Of course, he knew nothing Mark had uncovered.

Nancy Herrick, Chief of Accounts Receivable at Gangley Enterprises, tossed her red curls with the curling brush, put on her outfit for the day, and fed ”Muff.” The Chow-Chow was her only companion at home. It normally took her about half an hour to arrive at Gangley Tower, but if traffic was bad--and it often was in Houston--it could take forty-five minutes or more. She’d been at Gangley for eleven years; she had gotten the job when she was an ambitious twenty-eight-year-old. As she drove along in the Cadillac left by her late husband, she ruminated how life had changed during the past year. Losing Greg while still a relatively young had been very difficult for her and for their only child, Nadine. He was a charming man, a caring husband and father, and their life together had been good for eighteen wonderful years. Now, she was thirty-nine, widowed for more than a year.

“*I feel so lonely*,” she thought. She wished Nadine was there, or she could visit her. They had always been so close. “*At least I had her near me the week after I discovered Greg dead*.”

Greg had died in his sleep only days before the party she planned for his fiftieth birthday. During the two days before Nadine arrived from far away Ohio State, Nancy had almost lost it. After Nadine returned to school, the loneliness was so intense, Nancy had entered therapy. It had helped her adjust--somewhat--to living alone. Her and Muff.

The first decade in the accounting department had been a good-paying, dream job. The previous year,

she'd stumbled upon a stack of documents Mr. Gangley had started through the shredder, unaware that they became jammed only two inches in after he left the room. The shredder was in the Media room midway between her office and Mr. Gangley's, and she was entering as he left, and heard the shredder's motor straining.

"Executives are so impatient," she said, "always trying to feed too many sheets at once."

She pulled them out to clear the machine, and was re-feeding them a few at a time when her eye caught something that caused her to pause. It was a sheet of handwritten names jotted by Gangley, apparently during a series of telephone conversations. That in itself was nothing remarkable had it not been that some of the names had a large sum of money written beside them. Some of the amounts were lined through and a larger or smaller amount jotted to the right. They were mostly big names: City Council members, the mayor, a Harold Moss at the state Department of Environmental Quality, someone by the name of Roger Clarke, and several others she didn't recognize. The amounts beside the names totaled more than two million dollars, and instructions like *cash*, *wire to Panama*, or *Cayman account*, suggested this was a series of clandestine transactions. It was during the time that Gangley was pushing the city to purchase a six-block area from him for construction of Houston's new Convention Center site. Suspecting it was a list of payoffs, she folded the particular sheet, shoved it into a pocket, shredded the remainder and returned to her office. There, she could study it more carefully.

The City Council members were of particular interest. George Merrill just happened to be Gangley Enterprises's Principal Counsel *and* Mr. Gangley's principal golf partner. Edith Laurel had been a virulent opponent of the deal, yet had suddenly switched her vote at the end, without explanation. The mayor had been a vocal and ambivalent influence affecting the decision. In initial television interviews, he had opposed it, but afterward, occasioned highly favorable statements which helped secure the purchase.

Gangley had acquired an expansive, six-square-block area slowly during the previous three years, and not without difficulty. It was during that acquisition phase that he and Mr. Merrill became so closely associated. Nancy had overheard him telling Merrill he had more than 38 million invested before demolition even began. Having overseen the cost accounting, she knew the demolition had required an average of seven

million per square block for five of the six, and more than 13 million to level the block where the old twelve-story, Harper Building stood. Gangley had referred to it colorfully as “*Dinosaur shit piled twelve stories high,*” and it had to come down. That meant a total investment of more than 86 million to end up with six, completely empty, square blocks, every structure razed, ready to build on; no mean feat that close to Houston’s pulse! So of course, she reasoned, a couple million in bribes was nothing to him by comparison. To him, it was just part of the cost of doing business. To the recipients, it represented a small fortune.

“They all took the money,” she exclaimed aloud. That was obvious.

“*I wonder if we have had previous dealings with any of these names I don’t recognize,*” she thought, thinking that perhaps one of the regular accountants in the accounting pool had files on one or more of them. She ran a name search on every Gangley account. There were no matches. She went back five years, ten. No record.

She had always been loyal to Mr. Gangley. As she’d worked her way up the ladder in the accounting department over the years, she’d heard of occasional, “off-ledger” transactions, but had never seen evidence of any. Since becoming Supervisor, there was nothing strictly illegal that she knew of . . . until the shredder incident.

Most of the employees presumed there were illegal dealings because of the thugs he always had around to “bid his doing,” as he called it. Her reasoning was simple: he paid her salary, so loyalty was both her Christian duty and an apropos obligation. When she was employed, the Personnel Director had told her neither to forget, nor *ever* ignore, that above all else, Mr. Gangley valued loyalty. He wasn’t a religious man, she was certain of that; but loyalty was *like* a religion to him. That implied the need for it, which in turn suggested that there were dealings no one but Mr. Gangley and those *most* loyal to him knew of. She had also learned early on that the size of the coveted, year-end, Holiday Bonus was how Randle Ted Gangley confirmed *his* respect for *you*. Base salaries at Gangley Enterprises only crept up, slowly, with negligible, incremental increases. Yet, if you were effective, beginning with hard work, you could count on that Holiday Bonus being significant . . . sometimes notably significant. It was a riveting pair of corporate policies. If you were an unremarkable employee, so was your pay, and you were doomed to remain low on the corporate

ladder. On the other hand, if you were remarkable and were promoted into the hierarchy, hard work was a given. You were weighed in a different balance: You either were fiercely loyal, or stood a good chance of having to learn the correct spelling of *encyclopaedia*. The overwhelming majority of Gangley employees were paragons of hard work and loyalty.

She had occasionally noticed him admiring her cleavage, and once, not long after the death of his wife, she felt he was about to hit on her, but he never had. Indeed, he had treated her with respect throughout her career. The dream aspects of the job had faded last year, not because she discovered the document in the shredder, but something else . . . something that left her hating Gangley with the same intensity she had admired him, and determined to hurt him in the worst way.

It was late on a Friday evening about two months after burying Greg. She'd stayed late to organize and bind a sheaf of reports associated with the Convention Center property, when Gangley happened by her office. More than a hundred small parcels: buildings large and small, service businesses of all sorts, gasoline stations, shops, etc., had been acquired to make up the consolidated six-block site. The myriad tasks and details connected with the deal had imposed an enormous, continuing workload upon the entire staff, especially the supervisors, and she was a supervisor.

"You don't work by the hour, Nancy," he said, stepping inside, "yet you always stay when it's important to me. When was your last salary review?"

"Lawson increased me from thirty-two, five to thirty-three last year," she said.

"Without your husband's income, that can't be adequate. Is it?"

"I paid off the home with his life insurance, and my car. As far as everything else, I get along okay."

"Thirty-three thousand isn't enough for a supervisor with your commitment and years with the company. I'm increasing it to forty!"

"*Oh, thank you, Mr. Gangley!* You don't know how much this means to me." It meant the difference between living payday-to-payday, and having a life.

"Call me, Ted from now on," he said. "Your office is too close to mine, and your position too vital, to address me as, *Mister.*"

He returned to his office. Later, when leaving, she passed his door, and he spoke again.

“It’s been a long day for me too,” he said, after acknowledging the extra time she’d put in that evening. “I’m going to have a drink at the club. Why don’t you join me, bring me up to date with what’s going on in your life?”

She thought it a nice gesture. *The Chamber* was close—only a stroll across the street and down a few doors. Having just had a salary bump seven thousand large, it seemed rude to decline conversation related to “. . . what’s going on in your life.” Her acceptance was buoyant.

They ordered drinks, spoke briefly about Nadine’s excellent academic performance at Ohio State, how pleased Nancy was and how she’d missed her since the wedding, and other matters of interest. Most men that Nancy knew would have considered such conversation a waste of time, if not drivel. Gangley seemed sincere. Feeling comfortable with him, a *quid pro quo* seemed in order. Even after a decade in his employ, her familiarity with him as a man was devoid of detail. No one else knew much, either, not that they’d shared with her, at least. Why not venture inquiry?

“Ted, I want to ask about something.”

“What might that be?” Sipping his third Gin and Tonic, he appeared forthcoming, relaxed.

“I always thought you were from Chicago. Lawson told me you were from Detroit. Where *did* you grow up, and how did you come to head Gangley Enterprises? Other than the Real Estate Division, I have scant back story, especially of your childhood and early life.”

Gangley considered her for a moment, contemplating how much he should divulge.

“I grew up on the streets of Detroit, Nancy . . . the bad part of town; that’s what Lawson’s referring to. I didn’t have what you’d call a nurturing childhood. If I was to begin with my earliest memories, a rating chart of my mother would look like the Dow for 2002 or October of 2008, and my old man, that son-of-a-bitch, he’d get bombed on liquor, come home at all hours, and I’d hear them rolling around on the floor, fighting. She was Bulgarian, strong as an ox. That’s the only thing that kept him from killing her, I think. About the only positive thing I remember is the day he came home, having just gotten a raise at his union job. He was so proud. He said, ‘I make a-nickel-a-minute!’ Everything went downhill from there . . . as I recall it.

The one time I felt close enough to him to express the fear I felt lying in bed in the dark, listening to them, he blew me off, claiming he was simply defending himself. He could have been telling the truth; I'd seen her knock the crap out of him, witnessed that more than once. But I knew for a fact that he had let her have it a couple of times. Those were the worst nights, the ones he was most drunk, when he'd come into my room and beat the holy shit out of me after a drub with her. The last time I saw him, he was in one of his rages."

"He whipped you?"

"Used whatever was handy at the time. That night I saw him last, he used his belt. Not whipping me, because it wasn't leather, it was elastic, with a brass buckle and a brass tip on the other end. He was pulling it back, and letting go, popping me with the end. That hurt like hell, and I was screaming much more than usual. It left hellacious bruises everywhere it thumped me, took weeks to go away, too."

"God, have mercy, Ted! You mean, like popping someone with the end of a tower, like a *whip*?"

"You get the picture. She came in after I'd lost count, grabbed the nearest thing she could hit him with--my aluminum baseball bat--and smashed him across the back. At first, he was so angry, he went for her, but when he got close, she'd hit him again. It was like a replay, until I got past them and ran out of the house and down the street. I think she knocked him out. An ambulance came and took him away a while later after. I watched from behind a neighbor's hedges down the block. I saw the police come too, but I guess after hearing what had happened, they didn't do anything to her. They just left and drove slowly around the block a few times, looking for me."

"How did he act toward you after that?" Nancy asked, concerned.

"He didn't. I never saw him again."

"She didn't *kill* him?"

"No, she told me he was in the hospital more than a week. He came by one day while I was at school, took some things, and left."

"Did she remarry, or were you raised without a father?"

"She would have, but wasn't an attractive woman: big bones, lardy ass, all that and too lazy to do anything about it. Men took advantage of her low self-esteem, a steady stream of them, none worth a hoot.

The only reason I don't think of her as a prostitute is she didn't charge. She was just a whore and paid little attention to me."

"I'm sorry you had to live through that, Ted. I can't imagine it. My parents' relationship was so solid, and they were so good to us. What about your siblings? Just from what you've told me so far, I feel I know you much better."

"I just spoke more words to you than my old man ever spoke to me at one time. My father wouldn't marry her unless she got rid of my two half-brothers. She didn't want to . . . at least that's what she told me . . . but she did; gave them to her ex."

"Didn't she try to get them back after your father left?"

"In her condition? Shit, she didn't even pay any attention to me, half the time."

"Does she still live in Detroit?"

"Keep this to yourself . . . I mean it . . . she doesn't live in Detroit. She lives in an institution in Oklahoma, hopelessly insane. She contracted syphilis, and I guess she didn't know until she started going blind . . . maybe she just didn't *care*; probably had ADD, but they knew very little about in those days. I ended up in a series of Foster homes, beginning at age eleven. In Detroit, foster parents weren't well off, and most were in it for the state and county money they got out of it. I ran off twice. The first time, they picked me up within a week. When I was sixteen, I ran again, but I knew not to stay in the area by then. I went to Chicago, got a job in a slaughterhouse, and learned about meat."

"Meat?"

"Yeah, a lot about it. The income from *G-sales*, the check from Montana I receive every month, is from a cattle ranch. That's the reason I maintain my twin-prop. I fly there occasionally to see how things are going, scan the herds from the air."

"So *that's* what that account is. The name is so nondescript, I had no idea!"

"It comes from a Montana ranch I started with a partner who'd worked in the slaughterhouses for years before I arrived in Illinois. We worked together on the floor, and all he talked about--for eighteen months--was how we were stuck in the middle between the beef ranch and the supermarkets. He convinced

me to pool resources and go for it.

“It was in a shambles when we bought it at auction. Beef prices had hit a five-year low, and we worked our asses off just to stay afloat. Neither of us wanted to go back to Chicago. Have you ever been to Montana?”

“No, Greg and I never visited the Northwest.”

“If you had, you’d understand. It’s the most beautiful place on earth, not because of ranching. That’s not my bag, but the look of the mountains.”

He paused for a moment, remembering. Nancy could almost feel the energy he emanated.

“Someday, if I ever decide to act out my fantasies about retiring, that’s where I’d prefer to be put in the ground. Anyway, when the price floor rose for beef, we took in a third party, a money guy. He and my partner loved the ranch; I hated it by then, and they knew it. We formed an agreement--a perpetual lease of my one-third interest-- and I’ve gotten a percentage every year since. I used that to get set up here in Houston. I worked for a company that bought and sold oil leases the first couple of years. After learning the ropes, I made a discrete income doing it on the side for myself, and eventually went completely on my own. I got in at just the right time. That was the beginning of Gangle Enterprises. The real estate boom during the ‘80’s is what made me. I got into the income tax avoidance game, had doctors and other cash cows buying into office buildings and other properties as tax shelters. I got a piece of every deal, some on a continuing basis. I like steady revenue, not pops. When the government closed the loophole, Houston went dead for a while, and I gathered options. I bought what’s now Gangle Tower back then . . . It had a 20% occupancy rate and the builder was on its ass. The bank even accepted a heavy loss to get out from under it.”

“You were in the right place at the right time, for sure. You also were shrewd approaching opportunities.”

“Oil always comes back, Nancy; sooner or later. When Houston recovered, I started unloading the ones I controlled first to build cash. Then I began exercising the options purchased from the owners of the big buildings . . . that chapped their asses. They were all too eager to sell the option when the places were on their backs just to get enough cash to keep the utilities on for what few occupants they did have, or to avoid

the bank taking it over. But when occupants started pouring back in, and I showed up with them, they watched me make a killing from the sale later. Several owners tried to back out, getting the banks to argue that the options were illegal or had no force, because they hadn't underwritten them. They actually called me a *chump* or a *sucker* for forking over the cash back when they needed it so badly. It was like war for five years, one I fought mostly in the courts with Merrill's genius. For those who had called me a *chump*, it was settled out of court in a more medieval way."

Gangley had moved to doubles, and his eyes began to take on a strange look that made Nancy think it was perhaps time to leave *The Chamber*.

"Being from Detroit, it was a mistake to try to rip me off. Those months in the slaughterhouses made me very comfortable around flesh and blood. No one rips me off and gets to brag about it."

Nancy thought better of asking what he specifically meant by the latter remark.

"Thanks for sharing so much with me, Ted. For the first time, I feel like I know you. Maybe we should leave now? I know how Gin sneaks up on me. My heart goes out to you for the horrible childhood you suffered. Foster children are so vulnerable, and so often deprived of love and nurturing when they need it most, during the tender years. But what am I doing telling *you*?"

She'd had only three drinks, her limit. She felt the buzz. During the same period, he'd worked through six, including two *doubles*, yet seemed unphased. As they walked back to the Tower, they continued talking and laughing. It was a very pleasant experience. He walked her to her car, and waited for her to leave before turning away.

"*A perfect gentleman,*" she thought.

When she turned the key, nothing happened. It couldn't have been deader if someone had stolen the battery. Had they? Gangley looked under the hood, found nothing obvious, then offered to take her home. It was late and chilly. She didn't want to wait around in the dark for a mechanic to come, and she didn't trust taxis late at night, so she agreed. Indeed, she was *glad* he was there. Gangley Tower was in a safe area of town during the day, but at night, lots of bad things happened to people caught unawares. One could never be certain that a mugger or rapist wasn't lurking in the shadows, or hiding behind a nearby car, waiting to jump

you.

Gangley's excess became noticeable almost immediately. He made a precarious turn, turned the wrong way twice when she was giving him directions, and swerved once, almost hitting the side of a parked car. When they arrived at her home, she felt relieved, even *lucky*. She was also worried about him getting home with his Seville STS in one piece. Should she offer him a cup of coffee, *strong* coffee? She invited him in for a cup. He accepted, embarrassed she was aware of his condition.

Other than Muff, it was just the two of them in the house, her and the boss. She kept the conversation going, trying to delay him until he had two strong cups. Then he rose as if to leave, and she shook his hand, thanking him again for the lift. He thanked her for the coffee as he stood in the open doorway, looking at her warmly. Then, suddenly, he closed it, turned and embraced her, his lips on her neck. She wasn't sure how she felt about that until he placed his mouth over hers, sucking her lips in, and lowering his hands to her buttocks, pulling her very close. That was the moment she realized he wanted more than sentimental affection. He wanted something more accommodating, perhaps baleful, and he wanted it on the spot apparently.

"Ted, I can't. I'm fond of you . . . I am, but I've just buried my husband, and I . . . just can't, not yet. I'm not ready for a new relationship." But Ted didn't stop clutching her.

"I want you, Nancy," he said, and moving his left arm firmly around her trim waste, began unbuttoning her blouse behind her back with his right hand. Fear ran through her like a flood, and the first casualty was her confidence that Randall Ted Gangley was a gentleman.

"Ted, *No*, I *mean* it," she said, pushing hard against him, "I don't want this. Stop!"

She panicked, realizing she was as helpless as a fly caught in a spider's web. He was the spider, and she was the fly, about to watch helplessly as its insides were sucked out, leaving a shrunken, decrepit shell. She couldn't free herself from his tight grasp. She had seen a talk show once about rape and date rape.

"If you intend to resist," the commentator had said, "you have to be *willing to inflict harm* on the assailant."

She thought of trying to kick him in the groin with her knee, but in the position he held her, it was awkward. His lust had overtaken him because of too much Gin. What would be the consequence if she tried

to gouge out an eye or something equally horrid?

“*My God!*” she thought, when he unsnapped her bra and slipped her blouse over her shoulder, “*I’m in real trouble here!*” One bra strap was dangling halfway down her arm, and her left breast fell out.

Embarrassed, she began frantically trying to jerk away.

“Stop it! *Stop it, Ted!*”

“I know why you invited me up, Nancy. Just *relax*. Don’t lose your nerve now. I know you need it as much as I do. I want to feel your body against mine. I want to give you pleasure.”

“This *isn’t* pleasure! I beg you to stop. You’re trying to *rape* me. Think how you’ll feel tomorrow. *Stop!*”

Her shouting seemed only to buoy his conviction that he was actually doing her bidding. She tried to speak calmly, with reason.

“Ted, you’re being self-indulgent. I know you’re used to having things your own way, but try to realize how horribly wrong this is, and what a terrible thing you’re doing.”

Unflinching, he picked her up, carried her to the sofa, and laid her with her back against it, half sitting, half slumped down, like a child watching Saturday morning cartoons. His weight pressing her body down, he held her wrists with his hands. Both breasts now protruded in full view, still proud at thirty-nine. Viewing them, Gangley became even more inflamed. She twinged with pain as he sucked one of the long-denied nipples and the end of her breast deep into his mouth, encircling it with his tongue. He transferred her left wrist to his other hand, so that both were tightly gripped behind her back, leaving his right hand free.

“Ted, if you do this, I’m *reporting* it. *Please stop . . . please!*” They might as well have been rehearsing lines from a dialogue. To her protests and pleas, he replied over and over: “It’s okay, Nancy”, “You like it rough, like to resist, don’t you?”, “That’s *okay*. *We both need it.*”, “I want you, *too!*”. His repetitions grated upon her like a scratched, 78 rpm record in the old days when there were record players.

Within moments, her skirt and stockings were off, and he had worked her panties down to the ankles. He paused, momentarily, looking at her fully exposed body. She trembled as his eyes moved down her full length. She sensed a switch had been thrown, or a lever pulled in his mind: his smell changed; passion

seemed to exude from every pore. He was mad with lust, and it was happening. Oh, yes! Regardless of what she *said* . . . or what she *did*. Sick with futility, she went limp.

When he felt her relax, Gangley slowed his pace. She lay like a dead woman's corpse as he French-kissed her, sucked the skin of her neck and bosom, and feasted upon as much of the ends of both breasts as he could draw into his mouth. When he began moving down, Nancy descended into a daze of shock and terror, that awful place only a rape victim knows. Now, he was spreading her legs apart, his head between her thighs, tasting and fondling her with his tongue. No detail of her anatomy went unexplored as timelessness first enveloped, then pervaded her mind.

"You're as sweet as *honey*," he said.

"We'll forget this ever happened if you'll just stop now. Please respect the ten faithful years I've worked for you and don't *do* this."

If he heard her at all, the words were too distant, lost in space, like much of her sanity. She might as well ask falling rain to return to the heavens.

"Nancy, I want you to enjoy it too; It's important to me," he said. Grasping the back of her head in his hands, he thrust his tongue into her mouth as she felt him simultaneously penetrating her. Slowly . . . *ever* so slowly . . . he moved, deep inside her. He wasn't in a hurry. Every slow motion thrust brought bliss to him, and horror to her. The Gin postponed, but couldn't prevent, the inevitable. Like an imaginary, approaching thunderstorm, the pace increased . . . *deeper* . . . *stronger!* Thunder drew nearer, rumbling louder. Demons viewed from the shadows until it overtook them. In an *explosive* thunderclap, her sky fell as he lurched in orgasm. Her body quaked, shaken by undercurrents of violence during ravenous maneuvers. His childlike moaning at the end left her barren of feeling.

He stayed for a while, still inside her, still *throbbing*. When he had fully relaxed, he rolled off.

"*God Nancy*," he declared, leaning against the back of the sofa, beside her, "*God*, I'm taking you along on my weekend *Harley* trips."

Harley trips? So he could use her like a slut for his own pleasure every weekend? She felt like a dirty rag in the bottom of a smelly, garbage can. She had been *raped* by Randle Ted Gangley. He felt no shame

and actually helped put her clothes back on, kissing her intermittently.

“What does he think just happened?” she asked herself.

He had it his way; she had a hellish nightmare, betrayed by a man she once admired. That admiration now metamorphosed into hatred. He had the audacity to sit and chat while enjoying another cup of coffee before leaving. At one point, she was *sure* he was coming back for more, but he left.

As soon as he was out the door, she locked it, bolted across the room to the phone, dialed *911*, and reported she had just been raped. The operator said she was sorry, but the crisis counselor normally pulling that shift had called-in sick.

“Stay on the line, you poor thing! I’ll transfer you to a woman police officer; a male wouldn’t understand, and it would be embarrassing for you. She’s been here a long time. I’m sure she can help you.” The voice of a seasoned, street-hardened woman came on the line.

“I’ve just been *raped!*” Nancy shouted.

“Calm down, Miss! Is the assailant still there?”

“No, he’s gone, and the door’s locked.”

“Where are you, now?”

“On my sofa, in the living room.”

“You were raped in your home?”

“Yes, and he wouldn’t stop, no matter what I said or did!”

“Have you ever seen the assailant before?”

“Yes, he’s been my boss for more than a decade. I can’t believe he would rape me!”

“How did he get into your house?”

“I invited him in for coffee, because we shared drinks at the club, and I was concerned he could have an accident. A couple of cups of strong coffee, and I felt he’d be fine.”

“*Wait* a minute! You’re telling me that you were out at a club having drinks, you drove together to your home, and you invited him in?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t like it sounds. My car wouldn’t start, and he brought me home. He had too much

to drink, and I was concerned.”

“Uh huh”

“Well, it’s the truth! This wasn’t planned. If my car had started, we would have both just gone home.”

“So, tell me how it happened. Don’t leave anything out, and don’t exaggerate. I know you’re upset, I can tell from your hysteria, but talk to me, and try to stay calm. You invited him in--what time was that”

“Around eight.”

“And how long have you known this man?”

“More than ten years . . . ”

“And he’s never made an advance to you before?”

“No, that’s why I trusted him. I thought he . . . ”

“Did he slap you around, punch you in the stomach, throw you to the floor or any violent act?”

“Rape *is* a violent act, lady!”

“Darling, *I know that*. I’m trying to determine if he was *brutal*, that’s all. You need to calm down.”

“No, he didn’t do any of those things. He kissed me, then raped me.”

“Kissed you? Were there any witnesses? Do you have any bruises? Is there evidence of a struggle?”

“No, none of that.”

“O.K. Tell me how it happened, one step at a time.”

Nancy related the entire event, leaving out the most vulgar details. Her head hurt as she relived the experience.

“I presume you’ll be quitting your job *there*?”

“I can’t quit my job. I just got a raise, a big one. Its not about my job, quitting would just hurt me. I’ve already been hurt enough by being raped!”

“Who gave you the raise?”

“Mr. Ganglely did.”

“Ma’am, it sounds to me like this man thought you two were on a date, especially when you invited him into your home. You set yourself up for this kind of thing to happen. In a way, you set him up too. You

were careless. You *knew* he had too much and wasn't himself. That's the reason you let him in, *invited* him in. I wish I could tell you how often I *get* this kind of call. Let me give you some advice-- *good* advice--get a therapist and get over it. His lawyers would tear you to pieces in a case like this."

"I've got his semen in me. I can prove he raped me!"

"No, that only proves intercourse. So what? *Thousands* of people all around us are having intercourse while we're talking on this telephone. Big deal! He would say you invited him in, turned him on, it was your idea, and that you're just angry because he didn't ask you to marry him or a dozen *other* stories."

"I want him arrested. He raped me. It's as simple as '*no means no!*' Don't you understand that?"

"I'm afraid I do, Honey. Let me ask you, did you enjoy it when his head was between your thighs? Did he suck or just lick? Did he put his tongue in you? Did it turn you on when he licked your anus?"

"You goddamn *bitch*. How *dare* you ask me filthy questions like that? You make me *sick!*" Nancy screamed into the phone.

"Ma'am, you can't even confront those questions with a strange woman over a telephone line. You're much too delicate. You need to understand that if you take this man to court, his lawyers will ask you *every one* of these questions in open court, and some a lot *worse*. By the time they get through, with you having been out with him, inviting him into the privacy of your home with only the two of you there, they'll have the jury convinced that you raped him. Maybe you hoped to get another nice promotion. Lots of women sleep their way to the top, and not just in the movies. They'll fry you. I've seen very nice women like you destroyed on the stand by scum-bag lawyers. If you insist, go to the hospital and have the semen sampled, then come down and file charges. We'll have to follow up, but your life will never be the same again, I can promise you that. It's up to you, Ma'am."

Nancy slammed down the phone, sat down, and cried for a long time.

The hefty raise showed up on her next paycheck. It didn't seem related to the rape; if her car had started, there wouldn't have *been* a rape. If he had just come to her the next morning, begged her forgiveness, admitting he had drunk too heavily, misunderstood her kindness as signals for coitus, *maybe*, with time, things could return to normal. There were extenuating circumstances: She made key mistakes that night. She

could have been merciful if he had just validated her feelings. It would have helped assuage the indignity she felt.

But he didn't do any of that. Instead, the next day, he came into her office without so much as a "Hello" and closed the door. Locking it, he came around behind her desk, and smiling, placed his arm around her shoulder, pulling her head against him. She jerked back, fearing he was about to unzip his fly. She didn't know what to say.

"Sorry . . . I thought we were a number." He said, looking hurt.

"A number?" She replied, giving him a disgusted look.

He turned and walked out of the office much more quickly than he had entered, without looking back. After that, she got the cold shoulder. Having raped her, and finding she wasn't willing to accommodate him every day "No thank you very much," he lost interest.

The Ad

There was a twinge, just a twinge of sympathy for Gangley after Nancy pondered the rape for a while afterward. Maybe he hadn't approached her because he was embarrassed by her reaction the next morning in her office, or maybe, it was as basic as a lack of communication skills with women; maybe he thought pulling her cheek against him was romantic, and the cold shoulder was a defense mechanism. But he had wronged her in the worst way. He made no further personal gestures as the months passed. He was formal with her, seemed to take her for granted. She never felt clean around him after that. The twinge of sympathy evaporated, and she was left with only a desire for revenge. She felt powerless. What could she do that would punish him . . . *hurt him* . . . as badly as he had hurt her?

Then, she had serendipitously come upon his handwritten notes jammed in the shredder. She knew she could get him with those. She'd just bide her time until she discovered the best way to use the stuff against him. She watched the Convention Center deal go through, saw the changes in behavior a bushel basket of hundred dollar bills can induce, and now had decided it was the perfect time to tip off the press. That would surely kill the entire deal. She just had to be sure that no one knew where the information was coming from, or it would mean her job. Forty-thousand dollar jobs don't grow on trees, especially when you're *pushing* forty. She needed her job, and knew he wouldn't dare release her without cause after what he'd done. He owed her. She devised an anonymous method of tipping off the press. She drove to a remote location and sent an anonymous fax, expecting to see allegations made the next day, perhaps on the front page. It was a big story to be sure. But when the next day came, she searched the entire paper in vain. There was nothing, not even tucked away deep inside. So in last night's fax, she had revealed the mayor. That would get their interest, because a lot of people didn't like him. Now, she was looking in the *Late Edition*. There was no front page article . . . wait a minute! In the bottom right-hand corner was a box containing a message that could only be intended for her:

Dear Fax Friend: Need to speak with you confidentially before we can run the story.

We will protect your identity. Please call Doreen or Lou: 555-1446.

They *had* gotten the faxes and read them. They obviously needed something more. Thing was, you couldn't trust the press; Greg always said that. But if she didn't trust someone, Gangley would get away with violating her. She decided to talk to the Doreen lady from a public phone without revealing her identity.

Date Night was another of the Houser family traditions. They had rarely missed a week since their wedding. Their most convenient baby-sitter was Patricia, a teen next door. Normally, she got the privilege of staying with Tim. He was old enough to be home alone after school for a couple of hours, but they never left him alone on Date Nights, because they could be gone several hours, usually evenings. In the afternoon, he usually played with Patricia's younger brother Jimmy in one of their back yards, or equally likely, fighting video game wars.

Patricia was waiting anxiously. Doreen always brought carry-out home on Date Nights, usually fried chicken or bean burritos with extra cheese, Tim's favorite. She also brought goodies: cookies, maybe ice cream, and some fresh fruit. It was the only night of the week Tim had access to the diet soda. The rest of the time, he was restricted to milk and juice, rigorously enforced. Consequently, Tim and Patricia looked forward to Date Nights almost as much as Mark and Doreen. Tim was a delight to Patricia, always surprising her with conversations she might have had with another teen. He was in every sense a kid, but more tolerable to be with to earn the money for makeup and other lusts moms soon refuse to fund. Patricia was certain that some of the kids she sat had been smuggled from hell.

"Good evening, Mrs. Houser. How was your day?"

She lied, said it had been great.

"How was your day, Mark?"

Doreen was piqued that she always called her "Mrs. Houser," but always addressed her husband by his first name, teen or not.

"I spent most of it with a drunk guy, but I learned a lot." Patricia seemed baffled by the answer. What could anyone learn from a drunk?

They all entered the house, and while the adults freshened up, Tim and Patricia attacked the fried chicken. A few minutes later, Doreen emerged and reviewed her list of instructions and reminders with Patricia. When Mark came out, they said their goodbyes and left.

“Where to, tonight?” Doreen inquired, placing her hand on Mark’s leg.

“Joe’s Crab Shack!” he announced.

“Oh, Goody! I was hoping you’d say that.”

The Crab Shack was a half-hour’s drive from *Woods*, but worth every minute . . . seafood buffet, and the best gumbo available locally. The okra pieces were cut large enough, you could actually *see* them. It wasn’t a powdered, 50% corn starch concoction resembling brown goo mixed with rice. It was made fresh from scratch daily by a chef from Louisiana who knew the traditional recipes, and used Basmati rice. It added a nice touch.

They began with a bottle of wine, barely two glasses each, which had the effect of peaking the appetite and relaxing them. A cup of gumbo for Doreen and a bowl for Mark were prerequisites for assaulting the buffet. It was a romantic, sharing time, capped with a cup or two of strong coffee. Occasionally, if a hot movie was playing, they might go to the theater afterward, but usually, they were anxious to return home and continue the romantic interlude; Date Night was special, and they always seemed to end it in bed . . . *early*. Uninhibited, they loved exploring, still discovering new fantasies each harbored to fulfill.

Tonight was also special for other reasons; as they drove, Mark related his conversation with Clarence, including the discovery that Clarke had been on the take, but apparently had a change of heart, leading to the violent, spooky confrontation in Clarke’s office that Clarence witnessed.

“There’s one other issue I need to tell you about that’s site-related; it involves the Chronicle.”

“Whatever could that be?” she asked, her tone guarded.

“The Stoddard Solvent plume I told you about seems to be originating from the Chronicle’s corner of the intersection, not the Convention Center side.”

“*Oops,*”

“Why don’t you discuss it with Lou? I need to install two monitoring wells along the side of the

building inside the sidewalk. I'll make them as inconspicuous as possible."

"I'll talk to him . . . his hair will probably stand up . . . that's a liability issue! He can take the request for the monitoring wells to whomever the decision maker is."

"They'll shit; it's embarrassing, and they may owe Gangley big bucks. They either have a leaking tank where they put the waste solvent from press wash-downs, or their main solvent tank is leaking. In either case, it looks like it's been going on for a long time, so there's no getting around it."

"They'll want a meeting, of course."

"I know, just inform me of when and where; I'll bring the graphics and site plan I've developed that estimate the size and depth of the plume."

It was Doreen's turn to surprise Mark:

"As I suspected" she began, "the fax our fax friend was sending last night *was* to the Chronicle. She was actually upset because we hadn't run a front page story based upon her first fax!"

Mark laughed aloud at that one.

"Today's fax added another wrinkle: she claims now the *mayor* took half a million from Gangley as well!"

"Half a *million*?"

"Yes, according to her--*twice* what the two City Council members were paid."

"So it goes all the way to the top?" Mark mused, as he turned into the Crab Shack parking lot.

Sipping their wine, Doreen related Lou's idea of running a message box on the front page, and how they hoped the redhead might see it and call.

"Think it'll work?" he asked.

"Lou reasoned correctly that she'll almost certainly be looking to determine if the additional information about the mayor prompted a story or a teaser. There's a good chance she'll notice the message box, read the request for more information, and maybe call, or send a more substantial fax. I moved on it; it's in the Evening Edition today."

"So it's on the street as we speak."

“Yes, it is.”

“I never thought the two of us would be involved in the same case from two different perspectives,” Mark observed, “This is like a spy novel. It has all the elements, including a seductive mystery on both sides.”

“You picked that up from me; I was about to say the same thing. We’re like spies from opposite camps. I *love* it.”

“What if our handlers discover we’re *sleeping* together (“My name’s *Houser* . . . *Mark* Houser.”)? Doreen laughed, placing her hand between his legs. “*Woo* . . . *oo!* I’ve got the upper hand on you, Mr. Bond!”

The spy drama led to more wine than usual, and a voracious appetite for crab, oysters, and fish, all wonderful! The Crab Shack was more than a dinner together that night; it was a fantasy! They drove back to *Woods* still acting up, envisioning dangerous, fantastic plots centered on the Convention Center and the investigative role each enacted. The two spies pretended hot, forbidden sex with a special mystique that night.

Lying satisfied and exhausted in each other’s arms, Mark ran the tips of his fingers ever so slowly down her naked back, barely making contact.

“What if we were actually involved in a mess as wild as some of those we dreamed up tonight?” Doreen asked.

“Bond would be jealous!” he said.

They laughed, neither realizing that their boldest fantasy would wilt in comparison with what awaited them over the next four months. Around 10 o’clock the next morning after the box ran in the Late Edition, it began . . .

“It’s for *you*,” someone yelled.

Doreen picked up the call.

“This is Doreen Houser; can I *help* you?”

A very feminine voice on the other end of the line asked, “Are you the one who put the note to your ‘Fax Friend’ in the paper?”

Doreen’s heart leapt, began pounding. She had to handle this just right, or the woman might panic,

and that would be the end of it.

“I hoped you’d call. I could tell you were nervous about speaking to anyone,” she said, remaining cautious.

“My husband always said ‘you can’t trust the press,’ but I felt like I should call you. I won’t give you my name or any personal information about me, though.”

“Sounds very intelligent . . . husband . . . ‘said’ (past tense) . . . is he dead, a divorcee, maybe?”

Doreen was jotting down every clue on the pad in front of her as the woman spoke.

“Well, I agree. You can’t trust the press; but can trust a reporter who won’t reveal her source. That would be *me*. I’d never violate your trust or fail to keep a promise.”

“The judge can make you. There was a running story about a reporter who was jailed until he revealed the source.”

“Yes, but he *didn’t*, and it looked bad for the judge and the system. Public opinion was all on the side of a person being imprisoned without a trial. They lost big time. They don’t do that kind of thing any more.”

“If I give you the information, I’m taking a risk--a big one. How do I know you’re not the mayor’s friend, and so in the end you don’t run the story? You remember, how even Mike Wallace from *60 Minutes* betrayed that scientist from big tobacco. How can I be sure you’ll keep your word? I don’t even *know* you.”

“Damned *Wallace* again,” Doreen thought to herself. *60 Minutes* had screwed *more* than the scientist . . . they had screwed *everyone* in the news business.

“Well, why don’t we fix that? We can meet somewhere you’re comfortable with, and you don’t have to tell me your name; but I have to have something solid. Otherwise, it’s just hearsay, and we could be sued. We *would* be sued if we started claiming that the mayor and two City Council members took payoffs before buying the Convention Center property. Tell me, was Merrill one of the two council members?”

“Yes.”

“Who was the other one?”

“Edith Laurel.”

Doreen breathed a sigh of relief. Lou would be so happy to learn that his faith in his friend, Reiny

Goshen, wasn't misplaced.

"They each took \$250,000, and the mayor half a million?"

"That's right, and there were others involved, but I don't know who they all are. I have a list of names in the handwriting of Ted Ganglely with the amounts written next to the names. I know what I'm talking about."

"Why don't you fax *that* to me? *That's* the kind of evidence we need to see."

"You can see it, but there's no way I would allow this document to appear or be referred to in its entirety, because certain people would know I was involved. I could lose my job."

Having met the mean man following the redhead, she suspected this lady could lose a *lot* more than her job.

"Well, where would you like to meet, and . . . what should I call you?"

"You can call me Mrs. Red for now."

"*How cute*" Doreen thought to herself, almost laughing audibly, "*Freud would have loved it!*"

"How about the Coffee Shop downstairs at the Hobby Airport? I could be there at six o'clock."

"*Bingo!*" Doreen thought.

"That would be fine; I could be there at six."

"How will you know who I am?" the woman asked.

"Why don't you wear something red? Do you have a red sweater, or something like that?"

"As a matter of fact, I *do*, and I'll have it on. I'll see you at six."

"I'm looking forward to meeting you. You sound like a very sweet woman," Doreen commented.

"*'Sweet as honey,'* I've been told."

After hanging up, Doreen felt triumphant, and headed for Lou's office for an update. His idea had not only worked; his friend, Goshen, was clean!

Nancy felt like she might have found a friend. She felt a great weight lift from her slender shoulders. *Now*, Ganglely would get his. If he only knew what was about to happen, and he didn't have a *clue*.

Mark arrived home, anxious to talk at greater length with Doreen about the situation surrounding the site.

He noticed that Doreen's car was gone.

"She probably had to run out and grab milk, or something to go with dinner," he mused. But upon entering the house, the smell of food was absent. Normally, the second he entered the big front room with its cathedral ceiling, wonderful smells were wafting through the air. Today, there were none. He found Tim in the den, playing a video game.

"Hi Dad! Mom left us a note," Tim almost shouted.

"His adrenalin must be high."

Tim couldn't even take his eyes off the screen, he was so involved. Powerful things, those video games.

"It's on the dining table."

"Have a good day at school?"

"Yeah, *great!*"

Mark was sure he hadn't actually thought about it; just gave the expected response. He walked through the kitchen to the dining room and sat down in front of the note.

Mark, I'm so sorry to break the golden rule, but you'll understand why. There's spaghetti in the fridge, plenty for the two of you. Microwave it four minutes, stir, then another four. Please make sure Tim has milk instead of juice. Sorry Tim, you don't get a break, just because I'm not there . . . and take your vitamins! I love you guys.

Mom.

"Well, it must be very important for her to miss dinner," he thought, walking to the fridge. He retrieved the spaghetti, and followed her directions. Sure enough, it was perfect. He called out to Tim, but heard no response, so he walked to the den to terminate whatever computer war was underway. Tim soured, but the smell of spaghetti won the day, and they sat together like two pot-bellied hogs, sucking it down as fast as they could. Why not? Mom wasn't around to reinforce manners. Examining his protruding mid-section, Mark knew he would have to spend an extra hour at the gym, this week.

Doreen was feeling anxious; it was 6:15 p.m. and “Mrs. Red” hadn’t shown. She began to wonder if Red changed her mind at the last minute . . . had second thoughts. This had happened to her before. Having spoken with a lead and agreeing to meet, they’d chicken out. She ordered another cup of coffee, wondering what Mark and Tim were doing.

By 6:30 p.m. she was entertaining the notion of calling Mark and driving home, when she saw her. Waving, she put on her most innocent smile, so Red would feel relaxed. They were *both* smiling, so Doreen relaxed as well. Red had *no* taste in clothing, but Doreen already liked this woman. She was much more than she seemed when John Quince first described her.

“I’m sorry I’m late, Doreen. I keep the document in my safety deposit box at Central Bank, and I didn’t take the extra time into consideration when I told you six p.m.. I’m so glad you didn’t give up and leave.”

She seated herself across the table, and told the waitress to bring her a latte.

“Well, tell me about yourself. I want to know all about you,” she said.

Doreen realized instantly that Mrs. Red wanted to control their meeting and decided to play along. She told her about her background: about Texas A&M, about Mark and Tim, about her path upward at the Chronicle, her surprise at receiving the two faxes, and gradually worked her way up to the present. She included all of the information any woman would want to know about another.

“How about *you*?” she asked Ms. Red, hoping for a *quid pro quo*.

Nancy hesitated, then decided to tell about herself without revealing her actual identity. She told her she was an accountant, about her life with Greg, their daughter, Nadine, who too quickly became a woman, about Greg’s untimely death, and how lonely and bitter she felt after Nadine returned to Ohio State. She rehearsed how Nadine was married shortly, thereafter. But she did not reveal who she worked for, and nothing about the rape. She wanted Doreen to think that she was a public-minded woman who happened upon evidence of corruption, anxious to do her civic duty by bringing it to light without endangering her job in the process, or being found out by those she helped expose.

Doreen listened intently, trying to pick up information between the lines, but Mrs. Red was very

intelligent and there *was* nothing between the lines. She liked her intensely, however, and realized that she had an obligation to alert her that she was already being followed by some very nasty character. If she didn't, she would feel responsible for any consequences of her having supplied the details of the story. She decided she'd tell her how much she already knew after she had seen the evidence in the brown envelope lying on the table in front of Ms. Red.

"That's quite a story," she said, "I'm very sorry about your husband. I don't know what I'd do if I lost Mark; it gives me chills just to *imagine* such a thing."

"That's very kind of you. You're a nice person, Doreen. I'd like to get to know you, tell you the rest . . . my real name, where I fit into all of this. Maybe later. I did bring this," she said, opening the envelope.

As she pulled out the two pages, Doreen noticed that they were stapled together at the bottom, because the top two inches had neat little cuts every eighth of an inch or so apart, evidence of the obliterating capability of a shredder. Nancy placed two fingers of each hand on the top of the document in front of her.

"You agree not to refer to this document in its present form, or to try to keep it?"

"That was our deal; like I said, I *keep* my promises."

Nancy slid it across the table, and Doreen began an examination of the handwritten notes. "Good penmanship," she commented.

"Yes, he's very neat."

"*HE . . . hmm.*" She reviewed the list of names and the amounts by each.

"Do you know who these people are?"

"Some of them; I recognized the politicians immediately. And one works at the Department of Environmental Quality, but I have no idea who he is, otherwise. Roger Clarke is a mystery, and so are the other three."

"Roger Clarke owns Clarke Environmental. They were the first company to work on the site. Later, they were fired, and Delta Environmental got the project"

The quip about Clarke Environmental stunned Nancy. "*How did he have them working without a single indication anywhere in the accounting records?*" she wondered, but said nothing, as this would expose

her relationship to Ganglely Enterprises.

“I have no idea who *Slag* is . . . *this* is interesting, ‘25K to 75K if needed, depending upon how many . . .’ That’s kind of weird.”

“Yes, I thought so, too. I don’t know who Mac Turner is, and . . .” Doreen visibly jumped.

“What is it?” Nancy queried, excited. You *know* the last one?”

Doreen couldn’t believe her eyes: *Jess Remington*, but it had been lined through. That could only mean that Ganglely had tried to involve Jess, and he had told him to take a flying . . . Sure, there was no *amount* by his name either.

“*Thank God,*” she thought.

“Yes, Mr. Remington owns Delta, the company on the site now. But I’m sure he wouldn’t take money. The fact that his name is crossed off suggests that Ganglely tried to involve him and he told him to get lost.”

“That’s the impression I got. So that leaves *Slag*, and Turner. We need to find out who they are, don’t we?”

Doreen sensed Mrs. Red expected to collaborate with her on the investigation.

“Lou--he’s my boss--might know who Mac Turner is. He must be important, because \$250,000 is a lot of money. Lou just might know. *Slag* . . . that’s *got* to be a pejorative. No telling who it is. It could even be a code name. We may not be able to discover the name behind that label. This is hot stuff, Mrs. Red. You’ve got something, here!”

Nancy smiled; she felt proud, convinced a story was at hand.

“Of course,” Doreen was setting a trap, “there’s no proof that this is Ganglely’s handwriting, not without a sample one of our experts could compare it to, maybe a copy of some letter with his letterhead and signature on it . . .”

“Oh, *I* can . . .” Nancy stopped herself.

“You *work* for him, don’t you?”

Nancy put her hand over her mouth spontaneously, without even realizing it. She looked hard at Doreen.

“The first one to speak next loses,” Doreen thought to herself. She waited.

“Can I *trust* you, Doreen? I mean, *really* trust you?”

“Like a sister. I like you already. You have nothing to fear with me. In addition, I think you could use a friend.”

“Nancy.”

“What?”

“That’s my real name, Nancy Herrick.”

Doreen extended her hand for a handshake.

“Delighted to *meet* you, Nancy.”

Nancy took her hand, and Doreen gave it a gentle squeeze. Nancy felt completely relaxed. She was ready to tell Doreen everything--*except* about the rape. They spoke nonstop for almost three hours, during which they consumed almost an entire box of donuts and several cups of coffee, becoming progressively more hyper.

When 9:15 pm rolled around, she had the makings of a story. Nancy was to obtain samples of Gangle’s handwriting and bring them by Doreen’s office at the Chronicle. Doreen and Lou would try to identify who the other two names were. “Slag” sounded like someone who might have a police record. They would follow up on that and Mac Turner. Lou could probably be persuaded to call his friend Goshen and speak to him off the record. When Nancy came with the samples, they would update each other and share information. Doreen said nothing about Mark’s position in all of this. She would reveal that at the proper time. They gave each other sisterly hugs before walking to the Parking Lot Transfer bus together, and spoke of other things until Nancy stepped off near her car.

As she watched her, a searing thought ran across Doreen’s conscience. She had completely forgotten the entire issue of having followed Nancy the other night until she discovered someone else was already following her . . . someone else very mean.

“God, what if *he* was Slag?” A chill ran through her.

“But wait,” she thought as the bus halted at her drop-off point, *“I was so shaken, I totally forgot!”*

How could I have?” She had written down the license plate! She sat, not starting the car, turned on the overhead light, and began rifling through her purse. She almost emptied it item by item before she found it. She hadn’t lost it. She had much to report to Lou and Mark.

“Mark! What must he be thinking? I should have let him know long before this late I was okay.”

She grabbed her cellular to call him. He must be very worried by now; this wasn’t like her. It’s always when you need them most that cellular phones let you down. “Low Batt,” the two words that every civilized *Homo sapiens* over the age of ten most hated. She drove home, not arriving until 10:30 pm, finding Mark and Tim sitting next to each other on the sofa in the den, asleep. In the background was the familiar voice of Gene Autry from one of Mark’s old black-and-white Westerns. Carefully, she lifted Tim and carried him to his room, lovingly tucking the covers in. Returning, she was about to awaken Mark; he looked so peaceful. She turned off the TV, sat down next to him, and laid her head on his shoulder. He didn’t stir. For a few moments, a thousand thoughts raced through her mind, each screaming for attention. But gradually, they distanced themselves . . .

Sometime during the night, Mark was awakened by his bladder, disoriented to find himself on the sofa. He became aware that Doreen’s head was in his lap.

“*What time did she get home?*” he wondered.

Raising her head gently, he slid from beneath her and headed for the bathroom. When he returned, she had stretched out and seemed too comfortable to disturb. Mark decided to lie on the floor between the sofa and the sofa table. The lush carpet felt comforting, because he could stretch out completely, too.

“Dad! *Wake up.*” It was Tim. “Breakfast is almost ready, and Mom said I should tell you.”

“What time is it?”

“Almost 7:00 am.”

Seven in the *morning!* As close as he could remember, he and Tim must have dropped off around nine last night.

“That’s the longest night’s sleep I’ve had in a while,” he mumbled, but Tim had already disappeared

in the direction of the kitchen.

The smell of bacon was in the air as he followed along behind him.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” Doreen smiled as he stumbled into the kitchen.

The eggs were crackling in the bacon grease. Nearby was a plate of sliced, ripe tomatoes, and Tim was helping by buttering the 100% whole wheat toast as it popped out of the toaster, the only wheat bread that ever entered their home except sourdough. The sun was shining through the bay windows so brightly it temporarily stung his eyes before they had a chance to adjust from the windowless den downstairs. Mark walked to the stove and put his arms around Doreen.

“*Hmmm!* That feels *good*,” she said, turning to kiss him.

“I was starting to get worried when you hadn’t called by nine . . . started having visions of you being run off the road by a green Dodge--stuff like that. Tim and I fell asleep watching a Western.”

“I know,” she said, and *sang* softly, “I’m back in the saddle again . . . Back where a friend is a friend.” Mark laughed. She was always poking fun at his collection of old Western videos.

“It was around 10:30 pm,” she said.

“*Ten thirty?*”

“I know; I felt terrible, but the Fax Friend called yesterday morning around ten, and I managed to convince her to agree to a confidential meeting at the Coffee shop in the Hobby Airport.”

“Why so far away?”

“It’s where *she* wanted,” Doreen answered, putting the last egg on the platter. Mark picked up the bacon and, after salting the tomatoes, they walked to the table, where Tim was already seated with a huge pile of buttered toast.

“I guess she felt like she’d be safe there. She’s extremely sensitive about possibly losing her job. We spent almost *three hours* talking together. I like her, and did I get a story and evidence you wouldn’t believe. I have much to tell you, but it can wait until tonight. Tim and I have to rush, or we’ll be late. By this evening, I may have a lot *more* information--maybe enough for a story, or at least, a teaser.”

“What was she like, this Fax Lady?”

“One of the sweetest women I’ve ever met. We became instant friends. She wants to help, but she’s afraid of losing her job if Gangley finds out she’s the source after the story breaks.”

“She works for *Gangley*?”

“Practically under his nose. She’s been with Gangley Enterprises for almost eleven years. She’s a shapely, thirty-nine-year-old widow who’s very lonely. Her husband died young last year and her daughter’s off at Ohio State, married. That’s a quick transition to an empty house for a woman. Her only companion is a Chow-Chow named, ‘Muff.’ She has a handwritten list of names with payoff amounts written next to each. It’s all in Gangley’s *handwriting*, Mark!”

“You’re kidding; That’s enough to bring them all down.”

“Yes, and a Chronicle exclusive expose bigger than anything we’ve run in a long time! This is every investigative reporter’s *Dream* story. Her name is Nancy Herrick. She’s cute as a Barbie doll, but has *no* taste in clothing . . . unusual, because she’s sharp as a tack. It’s as if she’s intentionally trying to downplay how attractive she is. I did trick her into revealing that she works for Gangley. Once I had her trust, we shared everything.”

“*Everything*? What did she think about you trying to follow her home until you realized someone else was already following her? That must have freaked her.”

“Well, by ‘everything,’ I didn’t mean that. I intended too, but became so drawn into the outrageous nature of this story that I actually forgot until she exited the Parking Lot Transfer bus. I feel upset about it. Also, I didn’t want to mention it until I learned all there was to learn, because if she knew she was already under suspicion for some reason, I don’t think she would have told me a thing. She probably would have turned white with panic, and run out immediately. I was about to warn her to be careful right after that; I just can’t believe I forgot! I feel like I’m responsible for putting her into jeopardy, because I didn’t warn her.”

“Well, she was already being followed, so you haven’t changed her situation. You just talked to her.”

“Not exactly; she’s supposed to get some samples of Gangley’s handwriting so we can confirm absolutely that he did compose the document. We’ve got him, but I’ll definitely warn her today.”

“You’re meeting her again tonight?” Mark seemed surprised.

“I know, I’m breaking the golden rule again, and I feel bad about that.”

“Don’t; Tim and I did just fine. We ate the spaghetti, and had a great time together; right, Kiddo?”

“Sure did, Mom; it was fun. We talked about our drive to Mexico this weekend, and everything. I love Gene Autry’s horse. I want one just like it.” Doreen leaned over in her chair and ruffled Tim’s hair, then kissed him on the cheek.

“You’re both so sweet. It won’t happen again. No, she’s coming by the Chronicle during lunch with the handwriting samples. Today promises to be busy. First, I have to bring Lou up to date,” she said, as they all cleared the table and put away their plates and serving items in the sink, “there’s a list of things that each of us will have to accomplish, so we’ll split the tasks. Tim, drink the rest of your milk. You and I have to leave soon!” Tim downed it and ran for his room. “I’ve got a lot more to tell you . Some of it may shock you, Mark, so I haven’t mentioned it this morning.”

Tim marched in wearing his back pack, and ran out the door, ahead of Doreen.

“Bye, Dad; have a good day!”

“You *too*, Tim,” Mark shouted back.

“I’ll see you tonight, Baby,” Doreen said. “and I intend to forcibly exploit you, late or not!”

“*Woooo*, I can hardly wait; I’ll be lusting about it all day,” he laughed.

“So will I.” They enjoyed a passionate kiss, and Mark watched as she and Tim hurriedly drove away.

The Confrontation

Nancy arrived at Gangley Enterprises and went about her work as usual. However, she kept a keen eye on Ted's door as lunch approached. Normally, he left it open and unlocked. Most of the staff on the penthouse floor left at 11:00 a.m. for lunch, returning around noon. That's when she would make her move. She had already copied the signature page of several documents from her own files, but she hadn't been able to find any with something more than Gangley's signature—other notes in his handwriting. She prepared a frivolous memo in the event someone walked by while she was in his office. She would merely leave the memo which would have explained why they had seen her there. On the other hand, Gangley's desk was usually littered with handwritten notes from phone conversations, so it would be easy to obtain them and proceed to the Chronicle to meet with Doreen, as well as to meet her boss, Lou.

As 11:00 am approached, the staff began filing out, forming lines at the elevators. Gangley received two visitors around 10:00 am, and soon he left for lunch with them. She waited until the hall was clear, then walked casually to his office with the memo, finding the door open.

As she entered, she saw the desk in its usual condition and quickly moved to it. Gangley's glass-walled suite was shaped like an 'L' on one corner of the top floor of the glass tower, just below the Penthouse floor where he lived, in addition to his house in the suburbs. He hadn't presumed to invite her up there, but she was fairly certain that if she hadn't jerked her head back the morning after the rape when he came into her office, she'd have spent a lot of time up there by now, either on her back or on her knees!

Gangley meticulously adhered to a theory that he had *three* roles. First, immediately upon entering, his visitors--usually clients--were in the area of his enormous oak desk, an antique for which he'd paid more than \$20,000; she'd seen the check herself. Behind it was a very high-backed leather chair, impressively button-tufted, with a credenza on the side wall, as he wanted nothing blocking his view out the windows behind him. No executive accouterments were lacking. This was the area where he performed all tasks associated with his *Administrator* role. To the right, toward the corner, there was a low round table with all

chairs alike. He sat at this table when in conversations where he wanted to present himself on the same level as whomever he was speaking with. This area was where he exercised his *Communicator* role. The view between the Administrator and Communicator areas was blocked by a stunning, built-in, 1000-gallon, salt water, invertebrate aquarium; thus, it was not possible to see one from the other, even though the entire L-shaped suite was one continuous expanse. Out of view around the corner was an equally impressive area with a conference table and luxurious seats. This is where he acted out his *Negotiator* role.

Nancy began reviewing the materials on the desk, collecting several pages with jumbled notes written down. Since no one discovered her, she put the memo on top of the samples, then walked to the Copy Center, midway between her office and his, where she copied the handwriting samples. Returning to his office, she placed them in the positions and at the angles she had found them, walked out, and moved hurriedly to the elevators. She hadn't noticed that Neal Lawson was eating his sandwich, seated at the conference table in the *Negotiator* area. He started to leave when he saw Nancy going through Gangle's papers. As Gangle's Executive secretary, Lawson thought he knew about every deal Ted had in progress at any given time. Naturally suspicious, he stepped back around the corner until she left for the Copy Center, eased to the door, and listened to documents being copied, darting back around the corner of the suite when he heard her returning. He watched her walk to the elevator, peering down the hall.

A man Nancy didn't recognize arrived at the elevator at about the same time from the other direction. He smelled of body odor, was unkempt in appearance, and had a very noticeable scar running from the upper left of his forehead to the right of his upper lip, and the tip of his nose was missing, the surrounded part just sewn together, bestowing a creepy look. Even compared to Gangle's thugs, he seemed so out-of-place that, before leaving the building, she pointed him out to the *Security Desk*.

"I'm sure I've seen him in here before; I wouldn't worry about it, but thanks for calling him to our attention," one of the guards responded.

Nancy arrived at the Chronicle at 11:40 am quickly obtaining directions to the location of Lou and Doreen's floor where the Metro desk was.

"Nancy!" Doreen called out when she spotted her.

They were smiling like old friends as they approached, giving each other a sincere hug after coming together.

“I’ve *got* them!” Nancy whispered in Doreen’s ear.

“*Great . . .* C’mon, I want you to meet Lou!”

She led her by the hand over to Lou’s office and entered. Lou had just stuffed the last of a tuna fish sandwich into his mouth, so he could only grunt in acknowledgment when Doreen introduced her. He quickly wiped the mayonnaise off his right hand, washed down the last bite with a gulp of coffee, and shook Nancy’s hand, motioning for them to sit on the well-broken-in, but comfortable leather sofa across from his desk.

“Sorry, Mrs. Herrick, but you caught me in the middle of lunch. Do you mind?” he asked, reaching for a large, plastic container filled with his wife’s butterscotch pudding.

“Oh, *no*; I’m sorry to intrude on you like this.”

“You’re not intruding at all.”

“She brought the handwriting samples, Lou”

“Wonderful,” he said, as Nancy handed Doreen eight photocopies and one actual letter on Gangley Enterprises Letterhead, with handwritten notes on it, and his official signature at the bottom.

“I’ve got some good news, *too*. I had a friend at DMV run that license plate. It turns out, it’s registered to a Samuel Grudge from the east side, way out in the sticks judging from the Rural Route address. Carpenter Road turns into Route 3 way out in the low, southeast area. Crummy real estate, near the old foundry by the river . . . hardly *in* Houston. That’s good, too, because it’s a huge environmental mess that the EPA is handling directly. We ran a number of stories about it when it was news.”

“*What* license plate?” Nancy inquired.

“I’ll tell you about that *later*,” Doreen said, touching Nancy’s knee reassuringly.

“I’ve got Jason at the precinct checking to see if he has a record; he said he’d call me back within the hour. So we’ll see where that leads. How about *you*, Doreen? Any luck on Mac Turner?”

“*Zilch*; he’s a complete strike-out.”

“I’m sorry I can’t stay, but if I don’t get back *immediately*, I’ll have some explaining to do. It was

good to meet you, Lou. I hope this will get the story out. Oh, and here's a photocopy of the shredder document. I'm *trusting* your promise."

"Don't worry, Nancy. There's *no* chance."

Nancy left the office and moved quickly toward the elevators. She exited the building and was walking toward her car, when she caught the stare of a man looking at her from about fifty feet away.

"... is it *possible*? Yes, that *is he* ... the *smelly* man with the scar." And he was definitely looking at her before she caught his stare and he turned away.

Nancy panicked, turned and ran back to the revolving door entrance to the Chronicle, and walked quickly to the elevators, jumping into one that was almost full with the door still open. When she reached their floor, she walked to Lou's office, finding he and Doreen busy discussing something. She went in, surprising them.

"Forget something?" Lou smiled, then noticed the terror on her face at the same instant as Doreen. Her lips were white, and she was panting like she had just finished a three-mile run.

"I saw a man watching me on the street outside," she blurted out breathlessly. "He was on the elevator with me when I left Gangley Tower, less than an hour ago. I'm sure he's following me ... What should I do?" she pleaded.

Doreen and Lou looked at each other with a mixture of shock *and* fear for Nancy. Lou reached for the phone.

"I'm having security go with you to identify this fellow. Get back to the first floor; I'll have them meet you at the elevator. "

Nancy fled.

"I'm going with her, Lou."

"Sure," he answered.

They were met at the elevator by security, one guard already by the revolving door. Two guards accompanied them as Nancy pointed in the direction she had seen him. They ran in that direction up the block, looking hard among hundreds of people on both sides of the street, but he had disappeared.

“That almost proves he *was* watching you,” one of the guards reasoned, “or why would he flee when you caught him at it. Besides, what are the odds of the same man being at Gangle Tower, then here?”

“Are you *certain* it was the same man?” the other guard asked.

“Without a doubt. Will you watch until I’m in my car? If I don’t get back soon, it’s going to attract attention.”

“Are you sure you *should* go back? After all, if he was from there, and he was here, he may be back there again.” Doreen was concerned; Nancy was climbing into her car, “What choice do I have? What else am I to do? I can ask around and find out who he is, if I’m there.”

“Nancy,” Doreen could wait no longer, “there’s something important I need to tell to you about—very important! We need to sit down and talk for a while about its implications, and about all of this too.”

“Call me at home, tonight. Here . . .” She jotted her number on the back of a business card and handed it to Doreen, smiling as she drove away.

Arriving at Gangle Tower, she pulled into the garage and parked in her reserved spot. There were perks for the higher-ups at Gangle. She started to get out, but became seized with the problem of the document. She hadn’t had time to swing by Commercial Bank. It had taken too much time already getting it out of her safe deposit box and having copied it at a copy shop she passed on the way to the Chronicle. Depending on the scar-faced guy’s connection to Gangle, if any--he could’ve been some stalker or anyone--they might want to inspect her purse. She knew she was acting paranoid, but she couldn’t risk having the document in her possession. She decided it would be much wiser to leave it in the glove compartment; no risk of Gangle discovering its existence. Right now, he had no idea, so she felt fairly safe.

As she reached her office, something didn’t look right to her. After sitting and observing, she realized someone had been through her desk--*every drawer*--as if grazing without knowing what they were looking *for*. In her haste, she had forgotten to lock it when she left for lunch, now back without so much as a bite. She decided to walk down to the lounge, buy some junk from the snack machines, passing Gangle’s office on the way. The door to his office was closed, but upon returning, it was open. She looked in, prepared to utter some greeting if she saw him. There he sat, looking straight at her, arms folded, with his Executive

secretary standing, leaning against the blinds which covered the glass wall nearby.

“Nancy, you’re just the person I wanted to see; come on in, take a seat,” he said, motioning.

Lawson walked over and closed the door behind her.

“Go ahead and eat. How’s your life these days?” Ted asked.

“Fine,” she said, opening a bag of chips and popping the cap on a soda, “although I miss my daughter so far away.”

“Ohio State, right.”

“Yes.”

“How’s the marriage working?”

“No problems I’m aware of. I don’t even see her except during semester breaks and such.”

“You must be very lonely,” Gangley interjected. She was certain she caught him staring at her cleavage.

“How humiliating,” she thought to herself. “He’s not just looking; the bastard’s remembering what *they taste* like.” *God*, how she hated him.

“Do you enjoy your work here?” he inquired.

“Oh, yes, I always have.”

“Well, that’s great. Is there anything you need from me? Anything I can help you with?”

“No,” she replied.

“Okay. I’ve got a question for you though, if you don’t mind my asking . . .” He looked at her expectantly.

“Of *course* not; what is it?”

Ted looked at her like he could see right through her.

“What were you looking for on my desk, during lunch?”

Nancy almost choked on the chip she was swallowing, and quickly washed it down with a swallow of soda. Growing nervous, she tried not to show it. How could he know about that?

“Who *said* such a thing?” she demanded, trying to sound indignant. Ted glanced toward Lawson.

“I did,” he said. “When you snuck in, unbeknownst to you, I was around the corner over there, working at the conference table. I heard you come in, so I looked around the corner and spied you rummaging through Ted’s papers, collecting a few; saw you take them to the Copy Room, return the originals to their former locations, and leave for lunch.” He was known for his sarcastic smile, which was at its best. Ted was studying her reaction to the accusations.

“The thing is, Nancy, I’ve been looking at what *is* on my desk, and I can’t see a single thing anyone would have the least interest in copying.”

She realized that could save her, and started enacting the plan she quickly pieced together while Lawson was running his mouth. He would suspect it was a lie, but Ted wouldn’t, and she could care less what Lawson thought about anything. She had never liked him. He was known as a “backstabbing son of a bitch” around Gangley Enterprises.

She looked at Lawson and said, almost shouting, “Lawson . . . you’re full of *shit*. I didn’t take anything from Ted’s desk! I came in to discuss a memo with him, but he wasn’t in, so I decided to wait until after lunch. I had some documents I needed to copy under my arm, and dropped them on the desk. You probably saw me picking them up.”

She waited to see if Ted would buy it.

“Presumably,” he asked, “the memo you wanted to discuss with me is on your desk?”

“Yes, is now a good time?” she asked, as if she felt no sense of jeopardy whatever. He gave her the most frightening look she had ever seen on his face. “*But why such intensity?*” she wondered.

“It’s a *critical* time, Nancy.”

She shuddered on the way to her office, with both Gangley and Lawson in tow only steps behind. She had never seen *that* Ted Gangley before. She was so thankful she had thought ahead and prepared the cover-up memo. As they reached her office and entered, she casually reached for it, turning to face them, acting surprised that they’d followed her.

“Here it is. I wanted to ask you about changing the filing system on the subsidiary companies, and this seems like a better approach to me. On the other hand, I didn’t want to leave it mixed with everything else

and it possibly gets ignored. Lawson obviously didn't know what I was up to, and with his corrupt mind, imagined the worst.”

Ted studied the memo, then almost threw it in Lawson's direction. As they walked back toward his suite with no apologies offered, they left Nancy standing there, and she heard Ted say to Lawson, “She's *right*, you know; you *are* full of shit!”

At that instant, she considered herself the luckiest person alive. But less than an hour later, the intercom sounded. It was Ted *again*.

“Nancy, could you come to my office please?”

“I'll be right there,” she answered. What could it be *this* time? Entering the suite once more, the same two personages were waiting. Ted again motioned for her to have a seat. He resumed the discussion, having gotten some *new* reason to suspect her since the last encounter.

“Why did you go to the Chronicle today? Like I said earlier, I can't imagine why they would be interested in anything on my desk, and Lawson still insists you removed and returned several items.”

She froze visibly, remembering “Scarface.” Almost without hesitation, she responded.

”Looking for employment.”

Ted looked more than suspicious, but having won *round one* earlier, she knew how she would answer his next question, because she already knew what it would be.

“Earlier, when I asked you if you were happy here, you said *yes*; now you say you went to the Chronicle looking for a job. I thought you were happy here. Which is it, Nancy?”

“I was happy here until about a year ago, two months after I buried my husband. *That should work*,” she thought. Ted's face flushed red, first with *embarrassment*, and then with *rage*.

“You're being evasive, playing mind games. If you're looking for revenge that makes you dangerous.”

She gave him a justified look, almost verifying the basis for her suspicious actions.

“*She's onto something*,” he thought, “*pissed-off about that night*.” It was a night he had long since forgotten. What made her think *she* was so goddamned special?

“Think twice if you're imagining doing something to hurt this company,” he said with a fierce look

like he could bite a nail in half. “The only reason I haven’t *fired* you today is that I’m fond of you; you’ve always been loyal, and I don’t have any idea what you *could* be up to. I have many eyes and ears though-- *professionals*. Just remember what I told you at the club that night. And remember I have no mercy where enemies are concerned. Person’s I let get close who then betray me are the worst sort. You should have learned that by now. I just get *rid* of them,” he said, hoping Cleo’s team had finished what he had sent them to do.

She *said* nothing, and *denied* nothing during his tirade. But she knew he was watching her, perhaps had been watching her for some time with her unaware, and as soon as he found anything which he considered grounds, that would be her job. However, given the frankness of how he had just spoken to her, she could only assume he would *kill* her if he knew the seriousness of what she had actually just instigated, because it was far worse than anything he could be imagining now. It would seriously dampen him financially, and do irreconcilable damage to his standing in the community. He thought those documents had been shredded. She might have enjoyed watching *him* worry if she wasn’t so aware how serious a matter this was. Job? Hell, this wasn’t about having an income like she had thought all along. If you wronged Ganglely, it could be about life or death. Suddenly the job seemed unimportant.

Was I living in a fog all these years?

The phone rang, and Ganglely answered. It was Cleo, and he was reporting back. This was the call he had been waiting for. “Nothing at all?” she heard him ask, almost surprised. “*What?* From inside where?” As Nancy waited for him to get off the phone, Ted was listening intently, looking at Nancy. “Yes, go ahead; I *want* to hear it.”

As he listened, saying nothing, his lips grew white, his face pale and fearful.

“*He must be getting some bad news,*” she thought. His face flushed, and his expression changed as she continued looking him in the eye as innocently as she could under the circumstances. It was more than anger . . . it was anger mixed with a fearful-looking *resolve*. Suddenly, she was afraid. What if the call concerned *her* in some way; or was he just looking in her direction as he listened to an upsetting report?

“Take the rest of the day off,” he said upon hanging up.

“*Why?*” She wondered.

“Lawson, escort Ms. Herrick to the front exit.”

“Are you firing me?”

He smiled, like Lucifer might.

“I didn’t say I was firing you. After all of the hassle today, you deserve some time to relax. You’ll be in promptly in the morning?”

“Of course!” She knew she was lying.

“I’ll get my purse,” she said, leaving his office and walking toward hers with Lawson uncomfortably close behind. Fortunately, she had brought a *big* bag today, and before Lawson could comment, she quickly shoved the three pictures on her desk into it: one of Greg; one of Nadine with her husband; and one of herself and Greg with a much younger Nadine.

“I’m tired of looking at these. I’m switching them with some new ones.”

Lawson seemed too busy enjoying the moment to think about the implications. She reasoned the call had upset Gangley, and realizing that he had nothing solid against her, he was making a placating gesture.

“That’s a stupid-ass thought; why would he have Lawson escort me out?”

The *smartest* thing she could do now, she thought, would be to help Doreen, then before the story actually *broke*, leave the area *entirely*--go to California, or perhaps Ohio--and use her meager savings and the proceeds from the sale of her home to get a new start in life. Once the story broke, he would know the source immediately now that he suspected her, not knowing what *of*, at least not yet.

“Well, they say, ‘Life begins at forty!’” She thought.

Her mind was filled with these thoughts as she climbed into the car and headed for Commercial Bank. She had to get the document safely hidden away, and *fast*. Remembering his expression in the office, if it was discovered in her possession, she doubted she would ever *see* California or Ohio. Parking at the bank, she opened the glove compartment and reached for the envelope. Not feeling it, she leaned over to see it. Her heart turned to *stone*. The envelope containing the document was *gone*! She looked in all directions, but saw no one. Nothing else was missing. The car had been locked. She must have dropped it on the floor while

hurriedly shoving it into the glove compartment, so she looked on the floor, under the seat, at the end of the seat. Getting back out and opening both doors, she searched every inch of the car. She had *not* failed to put it inside the glove compartment. Someone had somehow gotten into the Cadillac, and discovered it. It could only have been one of Ted's security men. Her mind raced . . . *the call* . . . what was it he had said . . . "I want to *hear* it?"

"God help me! No wonder he turned pale and changed his expression like he was looking at Judas in person!"

He was as shrewd as any man she had ever known. By now, he must know *everything*, including why she went to the Chronicle, It wouldn't take him long to figure out why anyone would want to copy the seemingly useless handwritten notes on his desk. He probably already had.

If any of Gangley's perceived enemies had ever been in serious danger, it was her. She had to disappear *now*. She decided she would go straight home immediately, pack a bag, call Doreen and tell her what hotel she could be reached at, giving her the awful news of loss of the document. Doreen would have some ideas; she would know what to do. Nancy needed to speak with her. She had to talk to *someone* before she flipped out. The fear was so intense, she felt like she was losing her mind.

Arriving at her home, she pulled the car into the garage, lowered the garage door, and jumped out of the car, almost running to get inside the house. She opened the door to the kitchen, closing and locking it behind her. Whirling around, she felt her legs give way beneath her as the scene of Muff lying, whining, in a pool of his own blood, opened before her. A large butcher knife was still sticking out of his throat. Nancy began to sob uncontrollably as she removed the knife and bandaged the wound. Perhaps Muff would live. The kitchen was trashed.

"Someone has been in my home looking for evidence against Gangley," she moaned to herself, as she half sat, half lay there, Muff's head in her lap. That was obvious. Recovering, she slowly arose, leaving poor Muff, and venturing through the rest of the house, finding everything in total, deliberate disarray. She felt as if she was about to throw up and ran toward the bathroom. Jerking on the door, the knob wouldn't turn. It was *locked!* The burglars had done it! Her stomach contents in her throat, she ran for the kitchen sink, but didn't

make it. She threw up on the floor, almost gagging herself. She decided to call 911, and after washing her face and drinking a glass of water, she picked up the phone and nervously dialed.

Suddenly she heard a definite sound from *inside* the bathroom. She was looking right at the door less than twenty feet away. Someone was *in* there, and they were opening the door. They knew she had discovered them. Perhaps they had intentionally waited for her to get home. She screamed in terror, dropping the phone to the floor . . . No *time* to speak to anyone at the other end! As fast as she could force her muscles to respond, she ran for the garage, screaming uncontrollably as she heard steps closing behind her. She grabbed the back of a kitchen chair, pushing it over. It sounded like *thunder* as her assailant tripped over it, crashing to the floor. She reached the door to the garage, grabbing wildly at the lock, pushing the door open with all of her strength, and slamming it behind her. She was *ahead* of him. She could get away. As she reached the car, she suddenly realized that her purse and car keys were *still in the house*. She ran to the corner one foot to the right of the door and squeezed tightly into it as he smashed it open. Pushing him from behind with all of her strength, he lunged head first onto the concrete floor of the garage.

“*Goddamn it,*” he shouted as she closed the door.

She had seen him from behind when she pushed him. It wasn’t *Scarface*, as she feared . . . It was a black man she’d never seen before!

“You’re *dead*, bitch, and it ain’t going to be quick!”

She locked it before he could yank. He began pounding violently. The door to the back yard was to her immediate left. She threw it open, but with a flash of desperate inspiration, left it that way to mislead him, instead running to the *front* door. There was no way out of the garage with the garage door down *except* into the kitchen. There was an incredible smashing sound as he broke through the garage door into the kitchen, just as she was closing the front door behind her as quietly as she could. She ran into the street, waving her arms desperately as neighborhood traffic passed, running away from her home as fast as she could. A car halted abruptly.

“Nancy? Is that *you*?”

It was Moses Pearson, her neighbor four houses away.

“Moses, there’s a *man* in my house, and he tried to *kill me!* Can you take me to the police station right *now, fast?*”

“Don’t *need* to; there’s a cop car pulling into your driveway as we speak!”

“What?” she shouted, twisting her head to look. It was true, but how did they know? She remembered . . . *she had dialed 911*, but dropped the phone in panic. The operator must have heard the noise and sent a squad car by to check it out.

“Hop in, Nancy; I’ll drive you back to your house.” She obliged, jumping out of Moses’s car a moment later, just as the police were getting out.

“He’s in the back yard,” she shouted, “He tried to kill me! I almost didn’t get away.”

Immediately, the officers came to life, drew their guns, and ran toward the house, one entering the front door, the other the gate to the back yard. She and Moses waited. Abruptly, there was shouting from the back yard, followed by gunfire. Several more shots were fired in rapid succession. Nancy panicked. He had a *gun!* What if he had shot the officers? She jumped into Moses’s car in a rush of terror, shouting at him to get in and drive, just in case the intruder had killed the police. At almost the same instant, the back yard gate opened again, and the officer came through, unharmed. Returning to his squad car, he picked up his radio. “It was a Black male,” she heard him say, moving closer to hear better. “. . . no ID *on* him. He fired and I returned fire . . . No, I think he’s dead; better send an ambulance.”

Dead? It was a miracle! If a single thing had gone differently, she would be dying right now . . . *slowly*, and no one would have even known it was happening.

Corruption

Harold Moss sat at his desk, cleaning his nails, admiring his ostrich-skin boots. At six feet, two-inches, and the lift from the boots, almost everyone at the Department of Environmental Quality literally looked up to him. He'd started wearing his blond hair in a flattop in his teens, continuing during a stint in the Air Force, and hadn't changed it since, so he'd always been called by his last name by most of his associates due to his short haircut.

His position as supervisor of the case officers was prestigious in the Department. He reviewed the case officers's work; when a question arose about the substance of a consultant report or the appropriateness of a work plan, the case officer involved would bring it in for a conference. His supervisor and those further up were more involved in the politics of the department. The only time most people saw them was when some site owner with an attorney wanted to meet for a conference. He'd notify them, so when the owner arrived with his attorney and consultant, there would be an impressive array of state personnel on the opposite side of the conference table.

Geologists who conduct the site investigations and write site reports are referred to as "consultants." Some were worthless as thinkers, but they had the scholastic aptitude to pass the state exam, becoming certified. The owner of a contaminated property could only use State-certified consultants. Earlier in the industry, it wasn't like that. Anyone with a degree, and often individuals with nothing more than an underground storage tank excavation license acted in lieu of consultants.

Moss had an interesting and noteworthy background prior to joining the regulatory staff. He'd worked as a consultant himself in California, and his name appeared on national news when he exposed the dumping of broken up, radioactive concrete in the Tuolumne River. The consulting company he worked for at that time used the same well-drilling company for all of their monitoring well installations on all the sites they investigated. Two somewhat elderly brothers owned it, and he'd gotten to know both of them on a personal basis. They invited him to dinner at one of their homes one evening, and, as usual, the conversation

developed into a one-upmanship, as each told stories about sites they had worked on, an ignorant or stupid regulator they once worked with, which consultants shouldn't be allowed to practice hydrogeology, and so forth.

After they were all well drunk, the older of the two related an event Moss doubted he would have ever spoken about sober. He recounted having been called by someone at a national laboratory to inquire if they could haul broken up concrete chunks . . . did they have a truck that could handle quite a few tons of it? He responded that, yes, they could, and asked to have the bid forms mailed to them. The man responded, "This isn't a bid job. If you can handle it, you can have it."

He thought that strange, but went to the laboratory the next day. Some small building had been broken up into big chunks for disposal. When he asked how much the job paid, the man winked at him and said, "it depends . . ."

"On what," he responded.

"On whether we have to spend lots of time and labor filling out a stack of forms, or whether you can just lose it, if you get my drift." He had a sly smile on his face.

"Where do you want me to lose it, or does it matter?"

"Away from any populated area, where no one can get near it."

"Like the desert?"

"That's all up to you. You'll be paid in cash, and after you finish the job, no one here ever saw you before. And I don't ever want to know what you did with it."

It was a lot of money, and he wouldn't have to report it to the IRS, because it was cash.

The next day, he brought their biggest long bed end dump, and a backhoe filled it to the brim with the concrete rubble. He had driven to a remote spot along the bank of the Tuolumne River, not far from La Grange, and backed down a bank to the edge, dumping the concrete, although a good bit of it was above water near the edge. He left it in that distant location. It had been there ever since. The story seemed plausible, but very suspicious to Moss, who was one of the few true environmentalists in the company. Most geologists pursued their careers for money and status, or because they loved rock and study in the field. But

one could be a geologist and not be an environmentalist, just as one could be an environmentalist, yet be dumb as a stick if you discovered how little they knew about geology. He happened to be both, and very serious about each. He tried to ascertain the exact location, but at that point, the old driller clammed up, saying he couldn't quite recall. No amount of baiting could get the information out of him. Moss suspected he knew the concrete was contaminated, almost certainly radioactive, and was the evidence of a test gone wrong that the laboratory wanted to "lose." It cost Moss his weekends for the following two months, probing along the banks of the Tuolumne with a Geiger counter. He had all but decided it was just a fantastic yarn, like he often heard from fishermen in seaside bars as a youth, when his counter suddenly went wild one Sunday afternoon. He couldn't see any concrete though. The vegetation along that part of the river was like a blind. He was working his way through it when he stumbled over the edge of one of the chunks and fell, nearly spraining his ankle. There it was, mostly underwater, or buried in mud during the annual high water level of the river. He left the area quickly, because there was significant radiation.

Over the next few days, he wondered if he should report it. He wouldn't have to say how it had gotten there or even give his name. Should he . . . or should he not? He imagined small boys and old men sitting on the concrete fishing. How much radiation would they have picked up? That of course would depend on how long they sat there. If they did it regularly, they could develop leukemia or another form of cancer. He felt it had to be reported. He did what he felt he had the responsibility of doing. He called the FBI and reported the entire story, leaving out the name of the driller, since he probably hadn't been aware of the danger he himself was in, or the danger it posed to others. Fish hiding among the recesses of those rocks, as fish do, would become contaminated, and if eaten, would give a further dose to the fellow unfortunate enough to catch them. He waited, returning to the site the following week. To his amazement, a hazardous waste team wearing radioactive gear had a long-arm track hoe, and the chunks were being loaded into special trucks. This went on quietly for almost two weeks, with no notification of the press, until the site was abandoned. A great deal of the bank had also been dug out and the soil transported away. He had performed a valuable public service, and he felt good about it.

One afternoon, as he arrived at the apartments where he lived, he noticed two men in suits talking to

his wife. He could see them from where he was parked. She looked frightened. Rushing upstairs, he inquired who they were and what they wanted. "FBI," one of them revealed, "We need to speak with you about a matter."

After the conversation ensued, they related the call and the details given by the caller, and reported that the site indeed existed as was reported, and had since been cleaned up. They traced the call to his phone, and they wanted more details. He admitted calling as a civic duty, but pretended that a man in a bar got drunk and started mouthing off about it; he didn't know who he was, and wasn't certain which bar it had been. The men told him by their expressions that they knew he was protecting his source, but he didn't try to cover up for the actual instigator, the lab. They told him that lab personnel had been interviewed rather intensely, and that they denied any knowledge of or responsibility for the incident. A few days later, as he left his apartment and was about to enter his car, cameras flashed and reporters hit him with a barrage of questions. He didn't know who tipped them off, but he suspected it was someone wearing a suit. He repeated the story he told the FBI exactly, neither omitting nor embellishing anything, video running the entire time. That evening, there was a story on CBS News, reporting how a brave American geologist had been responsible for locating the site of, and reporting, a felonious environmental crime. They patched in a spokesman for the laboratory, enthusiastically denying any knowledge of it, saying they hoped the FBI would catch whoever had been responsible, and then patched in Moss telling the story. The city of Modesto presented him with an award in a ceremony involving the mayor, also shown on the six o'clock news, except most of it was the mayor's diatribe about the yet-to-be-located conspirator. The old driller was never approached, because no one knew who to look for, or that the man had been a driller or any other details Moss held back. Gradually, the story faded.

Later, he accepted a position as a regulator, which put him on the other side of the table from the consultants, beginning in the state of Wisconsin. He watched the industry evolve into many complex, highly regulated layers, with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the EPA, sitting on top of the entire heap.

Different states have varying regulations and criteria for cleanups. In Wisconsin, the legislature created a cleanup fund and endowed it with a large appropriation. Within a matter of months, contractors

exhausted the entire fund just digging up contaminated soil and hauling it to landfills. Almost none of the money went for the real problem. groundwater remediation. *Remediation* is the word for cleanups in the industry. And when someone did approach remediation of the groundwater, all they usually did was install one or more wells in the center of the contamination plume, pump out groundwater, and run it through activated carbon to remove the gasoline or other applicable fuels. After passing it through the activated carbon in such systems, the water is pumped into the city sewer system and ends up at the sewage treatment plant. It requires an NPDES permit from the National Pollution Discharge people even to take that approach. This method of remediation is known as Pump & Treat [P&T] in the industry, and other than digging up the polluted soil around leaking tanks, was once the most widely used technology for cleaning up contaminated sites.

Congress created the Office of Technology Assessment, the OTA, to evaluate the effectiveness of various environmental remediation technologies. After reviewing thousands of P&T projects, they announced publicly and to the Congress that more than 97% of the P&T systems in place were expected to fail. This troubled true environmentalists like Moss, who were frustrated by the lack of technologies that would work.

The OTA announcement sent a shock wave through the industry, and in effect, criminalized any regulatory official who approved a proposal for Pump & Treat. California reacted first, requiring that the consultant demonstrate that it could be expected to work before a P&T approach could be approved. Other states followed suit, and soon, this had the effect of killing many P&T remediation proposals immediately upon submission to the case officer.

P&T is based upon a theory that seems logical, but in reality is full of holes. The idea is, if you pump out the contaminated water from the internal area of the plume, the center, you will create a depression in the surface called a “draw-down cone-of-depression.” Creating a depression cone by pumping out the water causes water from the surrounding, adjacent area to flow into the space being emptied by the extraction well pump. Over time, clean water passing through contaminated soil should eventually clean it up, and the site can be approved for closure. In theory, it sounds good . . . in theory. As the OTA discovered, the theory was unsound. Moss suspected it during his entire career before the OTA ever admitted it.

Every consulting company loves site characterization (definition) work. Go onto the property, define the groundwater gradient, install monitoring wells, pull groundwater samples from them and send them to the analytical lab. The labs charge exorbitant rates, and so do many consultants. They bill like attorneys, so the client is more or less at their mercy. The monthly billings can be shocking to the consultant's client, but if they ask for an hour-by-hour explanation of the bill, they may not understand the industry-specific language, which is often mixed with sufficient bullshit to render it incomprehensible to the untrained. They soon give up, caught in a hopeless regulatory milieu which never seems to end. There is the Phase I site investigation, the results of which must be submitted to the case officer in a professional report. The reports cost thousands of dollars to produce, containing graphics, analytical results, a description of the local and regional geology and hydrogeology, and other pertinent data. It must be grammatically correct and make recommendations for expanded definition. All of the Phase I monitoring wells are usually within the area known to be contaminated, so it is necessary to install another round of wells further out, determining how far down gradient the plume has moved. This is the Phase II study, and if the plume extends a long distance down gradient-he had worked on sites where it approached half a mile to a mile, more and more wells were required to define the length and width of the plume, and more and more reports had to be written. It was like a gold mine for the consultants, and with billing after billing, an endless nightmare for their clients. There are meetings with the client, meetings with State personnel, and on and on. Every single hour is billed. Even a small site can result in site definition costs alone of hundreds of thousands of dollars. And still nothing has been done to actually clean up--remediate--the problem. Often, a client will finally explode, telling the consultant he isn't paying another dime for them to "study" the site; he wants it cleaned up.

For many years, the consultant, knowing he had no effective remediation technology, would recommend the standard P&T system. It was leased to the client, required an operator to check it periodically, and seldom ran only for months to clean a site; they usually ran for years. With tongue-in-cheek, having nothing better to offer, the regulators and consultants perpetrated P&T into a giant trap. Knowing it was basically a lie, it at least kept the contamination from spreading even farther, even if it couldn't clean the site. Most citizens, and many regulators who gave blanket approvals, weren't educated enough to recognize that if

you install one or more extraction wells in the center of the most contaminated part of the plume, after you begin pumping, you pull down the groundwater, creating a depression cone. As long as the pumps are running, the cone exists. But when you pull the groundwater down, you leave the worst part of the contamination suspended between the top of the soil contamination and the top of the groundwater depression. The entire soil volume above the depression cone isn't being remediated. It's just hanging there, adhering to every soil particle - waiting.

Place Figure Three Here

Eventually, if the consultant gets the groundwater concentrations low enough to convince the case officer that they no longer represent a threat to human life and health, permission is given to terminate the cleanup, but quarterly groundwater monitoring is required for a year afterward. So the consultant turns off the pumps, and the groundwater begins rising until the depression cone no longer exists. What is actually happening though, is that the worst part of the contaminated soil--the volume that has been hanging there above the groundwater-- now becomes resaturated, meaning that as it rises, the groundwater refills all of the soil porespace again, coming into contact with the contamination. Months later, during quarterly sampling, the measured concentrations of the contaminate in the groundwater samples begin rising until they again exceed regulatory limits. This is referred to in the industry as *rebound*, an almost universal problem where P&T has been relied upon. That's when everyone starts scratching their heads, wondering how this could be happening. Of course, any bright high school student should be able to figure it out. And what happens then? The case officer orders the pumps turned back on. Obviously, they "hadn't gotten it as clean as they thought."

Every quarter, the consultant is required to sample all of the wells. That costs thousands of dollars. He or she must then ponder the analytical lab data and redraw the plume with the concentrations noted as of that instant in time. They must then prepare a Quarterly Groundwater Monitoring Report for submission to the State--more thousands billed to the client. Moss knew of some sites, like one he worked on in Michigan, which had been running for close to twenty years! There was so little improvement from quarter to quarter that the EPA approved a reduction of the monitoring frequency to once a year!

When the Superfund was authorized, with hundreds of millions of dollars to “clean up America,” things had not gone as anticipated by the public from the political rhetoric, nor as expected by the Congress who made the huge commitment. They had been sold a bill of goods by scientists eager to profit from the newest pile of money around. Lawyers, like so many Draculas looking for a new juguler, sunk their bloodsucking fangs into the pile, working in conjunction with consultants.

Many clients at first thought they could protect themselves from getting fleeced if they got a lawyer to get them out of it. This, of course, was horse shit and every environmental lawyer knew it. Regulations are regulations. So the lawyers would go through the motions of sending semi-intelligent letters, offering frivolous reasons why their client should be excepted from the law. The regulators played along, consented to the meetings, with the client expecting to get off. Of course, everything his lawyer knew about the true environmental issues involved could easily be contained within a single fart, but the client only realized this after handing over a sizable chunk in legal fees that could have been better spent completing the site characterization he ultimately had to complete and pay for anyway, rather than attempting to forstall the inevitable. It reminded Moss of the most recent lawyer joke circulated around the office:

“What’s the difference between a lawyer and a catfish?”

“One is a slimy, scum-sucking bottom dweller, and the other is a fish!”

He laughed, then sighed, because he knew like everyone else it was true when it came to the environmental industry.

Over the years, the charade of the entire nonsensical mess had worn him down, until now Moss felt little more than contempt for every facet of it, including the regulatory side. He became a cynic. So many thousands of mom and pop businesses had been driven under, it bruised the entire character and spirit of the laws and regulations responsible. Practically every day, there was a new horror story. He remembered one of his first jobs, where an old white-haired man and woman who had worked hard and lived conservatively all of their lives finally sold their business, looking forward to their last few years together with relative financial security. As part of the property transfer, the gasoline tank behind the store was tested, but failed the integrity test. This meant it had to be closed, and the contaminated soils excavated. The site was almost pure sand

down to groundwater, and the leaking gasoline was almost to the groundwater seventy feet down. Moss had been given the project and secured permission from the County environmental department to excavate the soil and spread it over the parking lot, turning it daily with a tractor, until all of the vapor evaporated, after which it could be returned to the excavated area. Since those days, you would never be able to get away with that, but it made the cost of the cleanup much lower than it might otherwise have been. Still, it totaled \$80,000. The poor old man and woman were as nice as anyone he ever met, and felt it was their civic duty to remediate a problem they were unknowingly responsible for. They maintained a good attitude even as their retirement savings evaporated.

One afternoon when the hole was at its deepest and looked like the entrance to Carlsbad caverns, the couple brought some visiting relatives out to see the site. The old man could hardly walk, even with his cane, so his wife helped him approach the edge of the excavation with their guests. As they all stood looking with amazement down into the huge pit, the old man said almost with pride,

“This is my hole.”

Later, before leaving, he repeated it, “This is my hole.”

His wife helped him back to the car and they left. When Moss told his wife of the incident during dinner that evening, she had cried.

Eventually, public animosity escalated in response to the cruelty being exercised against fellow citizens, and it became apparent that if the environmental movement was to survive, something had to be done. To make the situation workable, many states imposed an annual tax on each underground storage tank owner for each buried tank. Using those funds, they created a state UST fund, with which to fund the cleanups. Often, the fund was additionally fed by a gasoline tax of a quarter of a cent per gallon, or perhaps a half-cent. The public liked it because it no longer meant that mom and pop businesses were guaranteed to go bankrupt if they became saddled with a cleanup; the consultants liked it, because it ensured that they would be paid for their services, and the State liked it, because editorialists stopped referring to them collectively with lawyers and consultants as “Ali Baba and the forty thieves.” Agencies could justifiably dip into the fund for necessary “expansion,” and it looked for a time like the perfect solution. However, once a bureaucracy is

in place, its main concern becomes job survival. By ingenious means, some power-hungry state environmental departments developed ways to drain unwarranted sums from the remediation funds to help support an often monolithic size. The public was unaware of this, and generally, it was hidden from the consultants. If they knew, competitive greed would lead to national exposes as their reimbursement payments from fund proceeds fell farther and farther behind.

Something interrupted Moss's thoughts, and looking at his schedule for the day, he noticed that Mark Houser from Delta would be in at one pm. This would be the first discussion of results from the Convention Center site. Moss respected Mark, because he was unquestionably one of the best hydrogeologists in the state. Test scores were never revealed to applicants for state certification. To be certified, a grade of 75% or better was required. This was unexceptional, but it was a constraint placed upon the state board by the Affirmative Action guidelines, so that certain population groups could gain a foothold in the industry, primarily those from poor schools and the lower end colleges. Of course, the regulatory community had access to the test scores, because the state was the one administering the exam. Moss knew that Mark had scored 100% on the exam. He *was* exceptional.

Moss liked Mark's energy, too. He heard that while Mark was in graduate school, he spent a summer completing a graduate project at the Bolton landfill in Modesto California. The landfill had been built adjacent to the Tuolumne River, Moss's old stomping grounds. Landfills consist of huge earthen "bowls," called cells, cut into the ground, usually rectangular in shape and perhaps 50 to 100 feet deep. Some were even deeper; others more shallow. When garbage trucks or people with a load of trash came to a landfill, they paid a modest Dump fee, and were directed to the cell currently being filled, where they backed up to the edge and dumped the trash. A bulldozer spread the trash out, forming horizontal layers, each of which was covered with a thin layer of soil. Then the next layer was started. Over time, the cells would gradually fill up, be covered with several feet of soil, and the process would start for the next cell. These days, cells require a plastic liner, thick and durable, with the liner bottom covered with a layer of clay before any trash can be dumped into it. This prevents any *leachate* from escaping into the groundwater beneath.

Leachate is formed by rainwater falling on the surface of a landfill, filtering down through the trash,

leaching chemicals, and dissolving anything soluble on its way. Later, it reaches the bottom of the cell. If the cell doesn't have a liner, like older cells before liners were required, the leachate enters the virgin soil at the base, gradually working its way down into the groundwater which presumably is below the base of the cell. If *hazardous waste* has been dumped in the landfill by various customers, some of it will leach during precipitation, so that the leachate is actually a hazardous waste itself.

The oldest cells at old man Bolton's landfill were built in the old days before liners were required. They were entirely legal at the time they were built. All of the newer cells had liners installed. When the state of California's environmental lobby was at its height, another layer of environmental bureaucracy had been created: the California Regional Water Quality Control Boards (RWQCB). As soon as it was in place, the RWQCB immediately devised a plan to ensure that their paychecks would be assured for the next decade. They took the thousand or so landfills within the state of California, and divided by ten. That meant they would address 100 landfills per year, and if there was a leachate problem, force them to correct it. Theoretically, they started with the worst 100 the first year, the next worst the second year and so on. The Bolton Landfill was on the first list, because of its proximity to the Tuolumne River, and also because in random testing, the RWQCB detected the presence of dissolved contaminants in the leachate from the landfill, which of course was moving down gradient toward the river.

Mark arrived for his senior project at about the time that the state was proposing that Bolton dig up the offending full cells and move the trash into newer lined cells. The problem was, Bolton was in semi-retirement. The RWQCB's proposed solution would leave the old man penniless after working hard his entire life. It was a great human tragedy. Bolton was so nervous and worried that he had developed huge sores all over his face--even on the end of his nose. It was pathetic. He was a short little man who once walked fully erect, but nowadays, his shoulders drooped. His wife had succumbed to the stress a year before Mark entered the scene, and divorced him, taking a healthy share of his wealth on the way out. His total net worth was now five million. The cost of completing the work the state was demanding was also around five million, which meant that he would spend the rest of his life on Social Security. It was like so many other horror stories that permeated the country during that period of environmental frenzy.

He had already spent over two-hundred thousand with a major firm when Mark Houser arrived for his summer project, which was restricted to the hydrogeology of the site. He was, however, given access to all of the reports and data collected to that time. He discovered that the leachate problem had only developed in very recent years, which was inconsistent. That cell was twenty years old, and had never produced leachate until the last few years. The problem Mark went after is why the base of the cell was being inundated during the high-water river elevation every year now, soaking the refuse and producing leachate, when for many years, the base had been above the water year-round. Further, it only happened during that period of the year when rainfall was highest. He acquired data from the river gauges which are maintained by the U.S. Geologic Survey for the previous 20 years, and noticed that during recent years, the river rose to a greater elevation during peak period than it had for decades before.

The Tuolumne river is fed by the watershed on the west side of Mount Owens. Unrealized by the previous consultants was that the city and county of San Francisco, always in need of more water, had obtained rights to the watershed on the *east* side of the mountain, and had built an aqueduct to carry it to the coast. It just happened that the aqueduct crossed part of Lake Don Pedro, and San Francisco quietly obtained permission to dump excess water overflowing the aqueduct into Lake Don Pedro during periods of highest precipitation. This meant that the dam had to release more water to avoid overflowing than it otherwise would have, and this excess water was originating outside of the natural watershed which formed the hydrogeologic environment of the Tuolumne River. In other words, San Francisco had altered the natural hydrogeologic environment to its advantage, but the excess water caused the river to rise much higher than if foreign water from the watershed on the opposite side of Mount Owens had not been dumped into the lake on the Tuolumne side. Mark installed a line of piezos between the river and the affected cell, and by taking daily measurements, mapped the subsurface groundwater surge which flowed from the river toward the landfill during periods of high water, showing it crashing into the base of the cell in slow motion.

Mark held meetings with the RWQCB, Bolton, and Bolton's attorney, Rip Normole, and discussed the implications. Either San Francisco should solve its own aqueduct problems, or they should be sued for the effects of altering the natural hydrogeologic environment, thereby indirectly inducing the leachate problem at

the Bolton Landfill down river from Lake Don Pedro. They were liable for the problems generated by their actions. Let them pay the five million. Mark had been there only four months, and managed to resolve the Bolton mystery. Bolton needn't retire on Social Security after all. Only the legal proceedings remained to be undertaken by Rip when Mark finished his graduate project, returning to Texas.

Such genius so early in one's career follows a professional, and fingering San Francisco was a widely and oft-repeated story within geological circles. Mark became known as the geologist to assign to the difficult projects, because he could correctly define and resolve the problem. So Moss was not surprised during their meeting when he learned that Mark had suspected and corrected the reversed gradient at the Convention Center site. He looked at the site plan with the diesel plume correctly defined.

Place Figure Four Here

"They excavated an enormous amount of material all the way to groundwater, and one of the excavation areas isn't even within the area of the plume, the one to the east," Mark told him, showing him the site plan with the excavated areas outlined.

"That's a huge volume to backfill." Moss observed.

"About half a million tons, it looks to me," Mark told him.

Moss was nonplused to learn that a Stoddard Solvent plume extended beneath a major city street, and appeared to be originating from the Chronicle, because Delta encountered it in soil cuttings during the installation of one of the monitoring wells installed just across the street on the Convention Center property, and then in the groundwater samples bailed from the well following its installation.

"What does your wife think of that one, since she's been at the Chronicle for a while now," he inquired.

"She doesn't know yet, but she will tonight. We've both been busy with this project for the last few days." Moss seemed stunned. He knew that Doreen was an investigative reporter.

"Both of you?"

"Yes, but she's working on a different aspect, nothing to do with hydrogeology," he laughed.

Moss didn't smile, which surprised Mark. When he noticed Mark was noting his reaction, Moss

brightened and changed the subject.

“What’s Jess’s latest lawyer joke?” This diverted Mark’s attention as he tried to remember which was the most recent, Jess told so many, and Moss’s cynicism fed on them.

“Well, let’s see . . . Oh yes, *‘What’s the difference between a dead lawyer and a dead skunk lying on the road in the middle of the night?’*”

“Beats me,” Moss said anxiously.

“The skid marks in front of the skunk!” They both roared.

“Why do you suppose they over-excavated excessive volumes of soil in the areas with only surface contamination,” Mark asked, “The whole site is pocked with craters, even in the low areas.”

“I guess they wanted certainty. It all must be filled to construction grade. They’ll need a good forty feet of fill in that low area alone.”

“It just seems like the contractor was lining his pockets to me. They probably removed three or four times as much soil as they needed to, perhaps more.”

“Maybe you’re right; maybe that’s why Ganglely fired them from the job? You could ask Clarke, although he might not appreciate insinuations like that.”

“No, it’s already done now, and we’re on the site, so I don’t think I’ll go rub it in.”

He already knew why Clarke had gotten fired. They shook hands, and Mark left. He had an appointment with his pal at the Ford dealership and was tired of the cost of the rental car he had driven since totaling his Land Rover in the accident. It was a constant reminder of how foolish an otherwise intelligent person can be.

The Scare

Mark and Doreen arrived home at the same time that evening, Mark driving a Ford F-150 Lariat, and Doreen anxious to tell Mark about Nancy's visit, Scarface, and the discomfiting position Nancy was finding herself increasingly trapped in. Both were completely unaware of what had happened after Nancy returned to work that afternoon.

Tim was sitting on the porch with his head buried in the latest issue of *Things You Never Knew Existed*. Every month, most of his allowance was consumed acquiring an astonishing array of devices, some quite useful, others stuff only a kid would fall for, and against the purchase of which, arguments based upon mere reason by grownups were ineffectual.

"Hi Mom, Hi Dad," he said; then he noticed Mark's new truck.

"Wow, were traveling to Mexico in that for Boy's Night tomorrow night, aren't we?"

"Sure are!" That had been a second motivation for Mark to purchase it before the end of the week.

"Oh, I can't wait!" he shouted, hugging Mark as hard as he could, "Isn't it beautiful, Mom?"

"Yes it is, Tim. Let's just order pizza delivered," Doreen suggested, "I still have lots to talk to Dad about and it's late. You go up and get ready for bed, then come back down and we'll eat pizza."

"Yes!" Tim shouted, darting toward the stairs. How he loved pizza!

After calling in the order, Doreen returned to the den. Looking at Mark, she said, "I wish I could undress you right now."

"I'll go for that. The pizza will be eaten and Tim will be asleep within an hour."

"Maybe, a little more than that. I must discuss with you what Nancy brought in today as soon as Tim's in bed."

"There goes the undressing part. You've made me curious now."

"I just wish I wasn't already feeling so wrung out," she said.

The pizza arrived, and they talked and laughed while eating about how various brands of pizza differed. Doreen and Tim's favorite was Pan Pizza from Pizza Hut.

“No way . . . Nobody makes pizza like Shakey’s,” Mark said, reciting Shakey’s slogan.

“Really,” Doreen observed, standing her ground, “if they can’t even come up with a slogan that’s grammatically correct, how can they possibly make better pizza . . . ’nobody’ instead of ‘no one?’”

“Well, I’ve never tasted their slogan,” Mark rebutted, “but when it comes to Italian Sausage and Black Olives with extra cheese, on thin crust, with Shakey’s sauce, now that’s a different matter.”

Tim was finally securely in bed. Mark and Doreen retired to the bedroom, settling into their sitting chairs in front of the DVD system, both knowing there would be no Blue Ray DVD movie tonight. Doreen recounted Nancy’s visit; the quickness of her exit; her hysterical return after seeing Scarface; the chase with the security guards; and her decision to return to work. She reached for her purse, removed a folded sheet of paper, and offered it to Mark. “This is the list in Gangle’s handwriting of the people involved and how much they were paid.”

She watched Mark’s face and expression as he unfolded and began looking it over. His eyes moved down the list. There were the two City Council members--\$250,000 each; the mayor, at \$500,000. The list verified what he already knew about Roger Clarke.

“The man does have a conscience to give up four-hundred thousand dollars . . . Who’s Slag?” he inquired, “and Mac Turner?”

“We’ve drawn blanks on both; but the way the amount is written after Slag’s name makes me think he’s a hit man, Mark. Notice the twenty-five thousand dollar increments? The next two names, you’ll recognize.”

Mark’s eyes halted. His expression looked to Doreen like a man at the exact instant he realized he’d fallen off the edge of a cliff. There was a long silence as Doreen almost heard the gears turning in his mind.

“No way,” he pronounced, “Not Jess. It’s been lined through, He’d have told him to . . . ”

“Take a flying leap?” Doreen finished his sentence.

“More like, take a flying *fuck*. Notice there’s no amount by his name. Jess is clean. I know he is, even without the indicators. But Harold Moss . . . two-hundred, fifty thousand. I just can’t envision him being bought off. He’s like a pillar of integrity. I just met with him today. He didn’t question our discovery of the

reversed gradient, or any of the data.”

He thought for a moment, remembering, “There was one thing that puzzled me though, when I told him about the Stoddard Solvent plume emanating from the Chronicle. That seemed to hit him hard. It didn’t make sense to me at the time. He should have been more concerned with our uncovering the true extent of Gangle’s site problems, not with the Chronicle’s.”

“It will be very interesting watching this saga unfold as your investigation moves forward.” Doreen observed.

“I think our separate approaches will begin to overlap soon, Hon. There’s a lot more to this than we’ve uncovered.”

“That’s the sense I’m getting as well,” she said. The phone rang, and she reached for it.

“I know Jess is clean,” Mark was still musing aloud, “and I can’t see what Moss could hope to do to get around what we’ve already determined on the Conven . . .” Doreen cut him off abruptly.

“Nancy? What? . . . slow down! How did they find the list? . . . Where are you? . . . Holiday Inn! . . . Well, yes of course, but. It wasn’t Scarface?”

Mark leaned forward. Whatever this was about, the name Scarface indicated it couldn’t be good.

“Mark could be there while you got your stuff out, and so could the police. Then, you could . . .”

Mark was baffled. What in hell was going on?

“Okay, just relax. If he’s dead, he can’t hurt you, and Gangle wouldn’t dare try again immediately after the first attempt failed.”

“He’s dead? Who’s dead? Doreen, what’s going on?”

Doreen placed her hand over the mouthpiece. “Someone tried to kill Nancy this afternoon at her home. The man almost got her, but the police arrived. There was a gunfight and they killed him,” she related, removing her hand from the mouthpiece.

The news disoriented Mark, shocked him into the realization that this was becoming something much more serious than an environmental problem, or even a political scandal. Attempted murder was serious business, and he and Doreen could find themselves trapped in the middle of it. He grew increasingly

concerned.

“Are you okay? Do you need us to come over, maybe bring you here for the night?....Very well, but if anything happens, you call us immediately. Really, Nancy, anything. We’re here for you, and I feel responsible, so I want to know everything as it happens. You’ll call me in the morning first thing? . . . I love you too, Nancy. Bye, and don’t leave the hotel; don’t even leave your room. Bye.”

Hanging up, she and Mark stared at each other with the same scenes running through their minds. If Ganglely tried to have Nancy murdered, who else might he be willing to kill to keep the scandal from getting out, or perhaps worse, losing the entire Convention Center property sale?

“Now I know who Slag is, or rather, was,” Doreen volunteered. “He was a black man she had never seen before. Scarface isn’t black.”

“Ganglely wouldn’t have used him,” Mark deduced, “not after what happened at the Chronicle. He knew Nancy would recognize him, because she rode the elevator with him in Ganglely’s building. Security knew him, unless Slag is Scarface; in that event, the other guy was a substitute, the original plan being scuttled. What was that about me and the police being there?”

“She’s not going back to work. She’s moving her things out of the house and leaving for Ohio. She’s worried about returning to her house alone to pack.”

“She’d be crazy to go back alone. He knows . . . he knows almost everything she's done. Sooner or later, she’d die in an accident or some other misfortune if she stays. This story’s got to come out Doreen. Once it’s out, any jeopardy *you* might be in vanishes. They’ll be no advantage coming after you, because everything you know will be in the public domain after the story.”

“True,” she said, growing nervous, “I’ve got to get interviews going, and soon.”

They talked about various scenarios, how to avoid any exposure in the interim. They explored courses of action available to Ganglely at that point, talking into the night. It was after three in the morning before either of them could relax enough to fall asleep.