



BLUE LADY

by

Ann O' Sullivan

LIFE is like an onion - you peel off one layer
at at time, sometimes you weep.

Carl Sandburg

Preface and Editor's Comments:

This is a fictional account based on the experiences of the author, Ann O'Sullivan. This is story of addiction. Never pretty.

Addiction can take many forms, chemical, physical, emotional/mental. All forms of addiction have one thing in common, they are something outside your self that lays claim to authority over self. "That is the bottle talking" (substitute other addictions for 'bottle' as needed to make this point). To those who have experienced the effects of addiction, either personally or in caring for another will understand. Nearly impossible for those who have not. I would venture to include 'social media' as the newest form of addiction, as in 'phone zombies'.

Society still blames the person, as if they had a choice, as if their consumption and enslavement was under their control. It is not. (Add in the commercial interests of keeping people addicted)

Recent studies have found that receptors in the brain change, permanently. Pathways and receptors are rewritten. There is no 'cure' for addiction, only coping strategies. An alcoholic is an alcoholic for the rest of their lives! The only out is to NEVER consume alcohol again. (again substitute whatever else a person is addicted to).

Not just the addict themselves is affected, has their brain rewired, and changed forever. All those in contact with the addict's behavior are affected as well, especially family members, co-workers, but especially those killed/harmed in accidents caused by the addict, etc. Then there are the lost wages, care costs, violence even. Their own 'cure' is to understand this relationship, and if related, realize there are genetic predispositions for addictive behavior, to understand that they are likely an addict in waiting (if not already).

Yes, a lot of this happened for real. Names, places, etc. have been changed of course. Memories are not perfect, but given what she went through, it is amazing that she remembered this much or even survived to tell this story.

The author soared once free from the power of her addiction.

As her first born son (not the one in the story, I was left out of the story entirely, as most of this happened while I was at college or work). After her death, it became my responsibility, morally and as the executor, to put this novel together in a readable form, along with cataloging her watercolors (370+). (see link below)

This is a copyrighted work in that you are NOT free to claim any/all of the text, etc, as your own work, BUT you are free to share with whomever you feel might benefit from reading it. A big wake up call to examine our own ‘bottles’ we try to deny.

Is much of reason for this work from the AA vow to admit past mistakes and make amends? Does it matter? Shouldn't we all follow this model and admit past mistakes, ask for forgiveness and make amends, if possible? (sounds like almost every spiritual tradition followed)

Note: It was a different time and people had different understandings of what was allowable or even expected behavior. Cocktail parties, going to bars to ‘unwind’ with friends or colleagues, was normal, even in my own lifetime (boomer). Look how often, even on recent ‘cop shows’ people end up at a pub/bar or drink together socially/celebration. A woman’s purpose was to pleasure men (rise of Playboy, Penthouse, etc) and to care for the home. That alone would be enough of a reason for some to seek escape, somehow, someday.

Judging someone from the past by today’s standards is no more realistic than to judge our behavior from the point of view of their standards. (yet every generation does this for some reason!)

Be kind. Learn. Grow.

See: <https://owamoosa.com/suzieq/>

Chapter I

1983

Ellen stood in the checkout line. waiting her turn. It had been a long hard day and she was very tired and so at first she didn't pay much attention to the call over the loudspeaker. Then she realized that "her checker" was making the call - "customer service on 2 - customer service on 2 - please hurry!"

Idly she looked ahead of her to see what the problem was. Mary, the checker,, was having trouble with the man who was first in line. "Sir, I can't sell you the beer. You have had too much to drink already and I can't sell you the beer!"

The young man was very red in the face, eyes half closed and almost stupid expression on his face. He didn't say a word, just pointed at the two bottles of beer.

poi-ted at the two qua~t bottles of beer.

The assistant manager came up and stood by Mary. Ellen thought that the manager would take over, but he just stood there. Still maybe he gave Mary some support because the young man then pointed to. pack of cigarettes. Mary sighed, "Yes, I'll sell you the cigarettes but I can't sell you the beer, you're too wasted!"

The young man pulled out a ten which Mary took from his hand. Shaking, she made the change and handed it back to the man. The manager then took the two bottles of beer and left the stand.

When Ellen's turn came, Mary was still nervous and shaking. "I just don't see why he wanted to buy the beer - he sure didn't need it. He was so drunk he could hardly stand up: Why did he want the beer?"

"He thought he needed it." said Ellen, "That is the way it works. He really couldn't help himself. He knows that he has to have the beer and that is all he knows."

"Well," said Mary, "I just don't understand it, I just don't." I do, thought Ellen, I surely do.

Chapter II

March 1975

Karen sat at the kitchen table, her back to the window overlooking the side garden. The garden was beginning to show the signs of spring with daffodils budding up and a few crocuses blooming. The walnut tree was bare, but if one looked closely, one could see the slight swelling of the leaf buds. It was pleasant out for a spring afternoon with the temperature in the low sixties, just a few clouds, in the sky and a light breeze stirring, but Karen wasn't interested in what was outside on a pretty spring day. She peered into the small hand mirror, pursed her lips, arched her eyebrows, first one then the other. It had taken her quite a long time to learn how to do that, to learn how to control the muscles of her eyebrows so she could make them go up at will.

She decided to redo her makeup. She always did it at the kitchen table rather than the bathroom as she preferred the light coming from the window to the overhead light in the bathroom. Besides, the round kitchen table gave her lots of room to spread out on. Carefully she smoothened the lavender eye shadow over her left eye lid. Yes, she really liked that shade. Karen had borrowed it from her best friend Laurie and she knew it looked loads better on her than it did on Laurie. Laurie was lucky though - her parents were still together - not divorced like Karen's. Karen missed having her dad around. Still it was a lot easier to get away with things since he was gone. All she had to do was tell Mom that she was going over to Pop's and she could go almost anywhere. She knew Mom would never check because Mom didn't want to talk to Pop. She had heard Mom screaming at Pop that last day, screaming that it would suit her just fine if she never, ever saw him again. Then Pop left, slamming the door. Karen had stayed in her room, afraid to come out, fighting the sick feeling in her stomach. When she finally dared to come out, Pop was gone and Mom was sitting in the rocking chair,

rocking back and forth and drinking from a very large glass, by then almost empty.

Karen sighed. It was probably better not to think about that. After all, it had happened over a year ago. Mom had been pretty bad for a while, falling asleep on the sofa, an empty bottle lying on the floor, but she was better now and in fact Karen hadn't even seen any booze in the house for quite a while.

Karen started working on her lashes, brushing and re-brushing with the black mascara, then separating the lashes with a pin. She remembered how Mom had gotten so upset the first time she has seen Karen use a pin on her eyelashes. She had fussed at her that the pin was dirty, she might get an infection, she might hurt herself. My God, Mom worried about the dumbest things! Of course one time she had poked herself in the eye with the pin but that was just because her older brother Kelly had snuck up on her and yelled in her ear, scaring her out of her wits. Kelly, he sure though he was a big shit shit - just because he hung out with Vince and Randy. They always walked around like they were really bad. Karen knew that they smoked dope and drank a lot of beer, but she guessed that wasn't too bad from what she had heard. Mom had found out about the dope and had pleaded with Kelly to stop. They she had threatened him that if he didn't cut it out she would have the cops in. Kelly had been getting pretty mean with Karen and Karen was getting so she was afraid of him. Some nights he would come in and his eyes would look funny, and if Mom wasn't around he would hit Karen. Once he had even punched a hole in the bathroom door. Right after the time with the door, Mom had called the cops and they had searched Kelly's room. When Kelly came home, the cops were waiting for him and they took him down to Juvie Hall. After he got out of the Hall, Kelly had gone to live with Pop. Mom had said she couldn't handle him - that the support money wasn't worth it.

Karen brushed her hair. It was blonde and almost down to her waist. She was proud of her hair and constantly washed it to keep it shining. She was also very proud of her figure, having

been voted the best body in high school. If only her nose was better. Karen hated her nose. What was the use of having a great figure if you had this horrible nose? Mom said her face would grow into it but Karen really doubted it. Sometimes it seemed as though it got uglier every day.

Karen wondered what Jack was going. Funny how much she had liked him - how crazy about him she had been - until the trip to Kansas. Jack had dropped out of school and had been trying to get work around town, but he wasn't happy with the jobs he could get so wanted to try his luck in Kansas where he had some friends. He had pleaded with Karen to go with him and Karen in turn had made Mom's life miserable, begging, crying, even threatening to run away from home. Karen knew she had really upset Mom by wanting to go to Kansas so bad, but Mom just didn't understand. Jack wanted her to go and you had to do what your guy wanted or you might lose him. Finally Mom had let her go, making her promise that if ever she wanted to come back home, to just call and Mom would send a ticket. At first it had been really fun - flying back and seeing all that snow. Karen had never seen so much snow. They had only had snow once in their town in California that she could remember and that hadn't even covered the ground.

But Kansas didn't turn out to be as much fun as she thought. They had stayed in a real icky place that even had rats. Ugh - the nasty things got up on the bed one night and Karen had screamed. Jack just thought it was funny. Things didn't work out too well for Jack. He wasn't getting the kind of job he wanted in Kansas either and soon they ran out of money. He talked Karen into slipping food into her purse while Jack kept the guy at the counter of the grocery store busy. Karen didn't like stealing food. That was really gross, but the worst part had been when Jack kept getting drunk and hitting her. Absently she rubbed her arm, rubbing the spot long since healed. Finally she couldn't take it any longer and she had called Mom and here she was again, back home. She sure liked California a lot better than Kansas! Stupid snow!

Setting the mirror down, she picked up a cigarette and lit it, slowly inhaling the smoke. She was seventeen now and she felt like things were really going to start happening for her.

The phone rang. Reaching back up behind her for the wall phone, she answered it. It was Laurie and she settled down for an hour's talk on the phone.

Ellen parked the little yellow Datsun in the garage that was attached to the house and carrying the small bag of groceries, she went into the kitchen, shutting the door, but leaving the overhead garage door up. She saw that Karen was in the phone and from the sounds of it, it must be Laurie she was talking to. Well, that would be a long conversation, of that she was sure. What isn't the world the girls ever found to talk about was a puzzle. Still, Ellen was glad that Karen was back home safe and sound and not much worse for wear after her trip to Kansas. Ellen smiled to herself when she remembered that it had only taken a ten days for Karen to come to her senses and realize that Jack was not the person she wanted to spend the rest of her life with.

Ellen put the groceries away and straightened up the kitchen. It was small and narrow with cupboards on each side, sink with a window over it and other side, the stove. Being so small it didn't take much to look cluttered, so Ellen tried to keep it picked up which seemed to be an almost impossible task with a teenage daughter.

"Since it is Saturday, thank God," thought Ellen, "and getting close to Easter, I really should make some hot cross buns. Karen likes them and I'll give some to Bill and Alma across the street."

Ellen had just finished kneading the dough and placing it in a bowl to rise when she heard a knock at the door. Wiping her hand on a towel, she went to the door, and when she opened it, she saw Jack.

"Oh, no," she thought, "I thought I was rid of him!"

Before she could think anymore, Jack burst into the room, grabbing Ellen by the shoulders and shaking her. He was a big,

powerful kid, only nineteen, but tall and rangy. His hair was more unruly than normal and Ellen saw that his face was flushed and his eyes red and wild.

Still holding her with one hand on her shoulder, Jack struck her about her right breast with this other fist, yelling, "You know what, you old bitch, I'm going to teach you a lesson for taking my girl away from me!"

"What the hell are you talking about? Karen wanted to come home! Get out of my house this instant or I'll call the cops!"

"You're not going to call anyone. When I'm finished with you, you will wish you had never been born!"

Ellen wrenched herself loose from his grasp, and with anger flaring in her green eyes, she grabbed hold of Jack with both hand on his shoulders and brought her right knee up hard into his groin, but the blow didn't even faze Jack.

Grabbing her by the hair, he swung her around and threw her against the cupboard. Ellen could hear Karen screaming in the back ground almost as though she were a block away, "Let my mother go - you're hurting her!"

Turning around, Ellen saw Jack pummeling Karen with his fists. Shrieking in rage, she threw herself on Jack, scratching, kicking, until he let Karen go and turned back to her.

"Well, you're pretty feisty for an old bag," said Jack. "I can see that you have turned Karen completely against me so I'll have to take care of both of you!"

Grabbing both women by the arms, he threw them at each other so their heads banged together. Then he grabbed a handful of hair from each and laughed while he made them hit their heads together over and over.

"Let Karen go - I'll do anything if you will just let Karen go!" cried Ellen.

"Not a chance - I'm going to waste both of you!"

Out of the corner of her eyes, Karen saw the rack of knives over the kitchen sink. "Oh, God," she thought, "not knives, please not knives!"

Both women were slightly built, but in good shape. Ellen was muscular from yard work and Karen had youth on her side, but they were no match for Jack. With a mighty bow to her head, Hack knocked Ellen against the corner of a cupboard and she slowly sank to the floor. She could hear voices, but her knees felt too weak to hold her up. Then she heard Karen, "You've killed her, you've killed my mom!"

And Jack replied, "Yeah, and you're next, you bitch!"

Struggling to her feet and throwing herself onto Jack with all the strength she had, Ellen did her best to save her daughter, only to be knocked to the floor along with Karen.

"Now I've got you both exactly where I want you--"

Karen and Ellen were both flat on their stomachs on the kitchen floor, not knowing what to expect next when there was a loud banging at the front door.

"Open up, police!"

"Help, oh, please help!" cried Ellen.

With a noise almost like an explosion, the police were in the door and running into the kitchen.

"OK, folks, let's everyone go outside and talk this thing over!"

"I ain't going anywhere with you shitheads!" yelled Jack.

Karen ran out the back door, but Ellen stood her ground, hanging onto the kitchen sink for support.

"Get outside, ma'am, we'll take care of this," said one of the cops.

But things happened too fast for Ellen to make a move, for Jack lunged at the officer and tore off his badge, grabbing at his clothes in a frantic attempt to strike him. The other cops immediately grabbed Jack and threw him on the floor, pressing him to the ground with their own bodies. The first cop got out his handcuffs and then removed Jack's own belt and tied his feet together.

Jack was struggling and yelling curses as they carried him to the waiting patrol car. Seeing Jack safely locked up in the car, Ellen walked slowly outside. The neighbors were all standing

around in bunches, watching, and Kelly was there - standing off by himself. Seeing his mother, Kelly came over and taking her arm in a tight grip, he steered her toward the house.

"Get inside, Mom, you are making a spectacle of yourself!"

"My God, Kelly, don't you understand that Jack almost killed Karen and me?"

"Just a minute, ma'am," interrupted the police officer, coming up from behind, "I am going to need a statement from you."

"Of course," said Ellen, and sitting down on the curb, she told the officer all she could remember.

"What is going to happen now?" she asked.

"Well, we are going to charge him with resisting arrest and for striking a police officer -"

"But what about what he did to me and Karen?" asked Ellen.

"Sorry, ma'am, but since he was a former boyfriend of your daughter's he really had established a normal pattern to be in your home. By the way, it was lucky that your daughter's girl friend called us when she heard the commotion over the phone. What Jack did was wrong, but the law will only allow you to get a restraining order to keep him away from your home. However, we will prosecute him for striking an officer and he will probably get six months out at the jail farm. We will need your testimony at the trial, so please make yourself available."

"I can't believe that Jack can get away with coming into my home and nearly killing me and my daughter!"

"Sorry, but that's the law. Why don't you check with the DA? Maybe he can advise you."

Slowly, Ellen walked back into the house, her neighbor Alma following her in. The front door was completely flattened on the living room floor. "That was the loud noise that sounded like an explosion," Ellen thought. She was shocked when she saw a solitary boot print on the door. It had only taken one good kick to knock it down! In the kitchen was the real mess - broken dishes, flour, blood smeared on the cupboard, and hair

everywhere - Karen's lovely blonde hair and Ellen's brown hair p actually chunks of hair strewn all over the floor.

Ellen sat down at the kitchen table where Karen had been putting on her makeup only a short time before. Tears suddenly streamed down her face and she sobbed to Alma, "HOW could this have happened, how could this have happened?"

Chapter III

"Mom, let me do that," said Karen, coming in the back door and taking the broom away from her mother.

"Oh, Karen," Ellen said, fresh tears starting again, "I'm so glad you are all right. When I think of what almost happened - "

"I know, Mom. I don't think I have ever been so scared in my whole life. When Jack had us both over the sink, I looked up and saw the knives there and I was so scared he would see them and cut us up with them! You sure were terrific, Mom, the way you kept slugging him!"

"All I could think of was that he was going to hurt you and I just couldn't stand it. But you know, it was funny that he didn't even wince when I kneed him. I thought that was supposed to disable a ma, but it sure didn't work on him."

"I guess we were pretty lucky - lucky that Laurie was on the phone when Jack came in because she called the cops. Wow! We sure lost a lot of hair! Do you think it will grow back? My head is so sore."

"Yes, I'm sure it will grow back, but tell me, Karen, has Jack ever hit you?"

"Yeah, he used to hit me now and then, but nothing like today. I was surprised to see him back, 'cuz I thought he was in Kansas, but Kelly told me - ", Karen's voice trailed off.

"Kelly! What did Kelly tell you?"

"Oh, nothing much, it's not important. Mom what are you going to do about the front door? We can't leave it like that!"

Just then a knock sounded at the back door. Karen and Ellen both jumped.

"Ellen, it's me, Bill," came a voice.

"Oh, Bill, please come in," said Ellen.

"I thought your might need some help - Alma said things were in a mess. Hmm, that front door is quite a sight, but I think I can fix it."

An hour later and the front door was back in place, glued and screwed with only a few signs of its torment. The kitchen

was swept and tidied up and the only visible signs of the horror of the afternoon were the bruises now turning purple in Ellen's face and arms. Ellen could hardly believe it, but Karen was going out for the evening. She had announced that she had a date with a new boy in town, his name was Steve and he was a real dream. Ellen fervently hoped that Steve didn't turn into the nightmare that Jack did. She guessed she was getting old or something. Karen had seemed to bounce right back from the afternoon's tragedy, while the horror remained in Ellen's mind. Her home that she had always felt so safe in no longer was a haven from the world, but one more place to be watchful and careful in.

The next day Ellen went to the local hardware store and purchased a peephole for the back door. Next time she wouldn't open the door until she saw who was out there first. Then she bought two steel hooks and a length of two by four lumber and some large wood screws.

Ellen worked all Sunday afternoon installing the peephole, then attaching the steel hooks to the frame of the front door. When she placed the two by four across the door, she felt rather like a pioneer woman with a log barricade, but if it worked, then who cared.

Monday at work Ellen was met with curious stares, then questions from her co-workers at the claims office of Safety Insurance. The bruises on her face and arms were very visible and shocking, but several women moaned about the loss of Ellen's hair. Ellen's hair was shoulder length and naturally curly, quite the envy of several of the other secretaries.

Cecelia asked, "How did you ever manage to survive? You are so lender and looks so frail - " her voice trailing off as she thought about her own immense size.

"I guess I am pretty tough from doing so much gardening," answered Ellen, "but I did find out that knowing a guy doesn't do as much as the movies lead you to think!"

A few more comments were made, mostly about the kids of today, and everyone moved back to their respective desks. Ellen

was left with the vague feeling that everyone thought it was her fault for letting Karen go with such a rough boy. "Of course not," she thought, "I'm getting a bit paranoid or something,"

When Lloyd came in from inspecting a fire claim, he looked at Ellen with shock. Ellen's eyes welled up with tears just seeing the compassion on his face. The gentleness and yet the great strength that was this man astounded Ellen, but then she was in love with him and he with her - with but one flaw - his wife.

Speaking very low and impulsively reaching out and touching her face, he said, "What in the world happened?"

Ellen winced and drew back. She tried to keep her voice casual and quiet as she told him about Saturday afternoon, all the horror and the damage, then speaking with pride about her idea of the door barricade.

"Oh, my poor love," Said Lloyd. "If only you could have called me. I'd give anything to get my hands on that Jack - "

"You know I couldn't call you - what is 'she' answered the phone? I can tell from the way she looks at me that she suspects something!"

"Ellen, I would marry you in a flash if I was free. If only the kids were older so I could explain to them and leave. But now with Olivia's illness, I could never leave her and be able to live with myself. She has done nothing to me, it is I who have failed her and have grown to love someone else."

"Please, let's not talk about it now. I'm too upset as it is, and I have to get to work. I'll see you later."

"I'll try and see you tonight. I think Olivia has a church meeting and if she does, I can get out for an hour or so. Will Karen be home?"

"Probably not, she very seldom is anymore. I think she spends more time at Laurie's that at home. But call me first."

Barely touching finger, they parted and went back to work at their respective desks in the large open office, Ellen as head claims secretary and Lloyd as fire adjuster.

Ellen called the District Attorney for an appointment and was told she could see him at four. When she left for the

meeting, she promised her manager, Mr. Early, that she would make up the work the next day.

"Don't worry about it Ellen, take as long as you like. You have put in so much overtime gratis that you could take the whole week off and I would still owe you time," said her boss.

Frank Stevens, the District Attorney, was in the midst of an important murder case, but election time was coming up again and he thought he should see this abused woman. He glanced up when Ellen entered his office, seeing a slender, pleasantly featured woman perhaps her late thirties. "A bit mousy for my type," he thought, and he spoke aloud, "Please come in, Mrs. Thompson. sit right there. Now, what can I do for you?"

After Ellen had explained what had happened the previous Saturday, he leaned back in his chair, touching his finger tips together. "Well, Mrs. Thompson, you are a mighty brave lady. You can be very proud of the fight you put up against Jack Jarvis."

"That is one thing I just don't understand, Mr. Stevens, I hit Jack with all the strength I had - and was fighting for my daughter's very life. I even kneed him as hard as I could, and he didn't even wince. Karen and I were both fighting and yet we couldn't do anything to save ourselves!"

"Well, now, that is because he was hopped up on drugs. He told us he had taken eight Darvons and a pint of rum and several beers. He probably couldn't feel anything! You shouldn't feel bad. After all, it took three of our finest and strongest officers to subdue him. Now, I'm sorry that the County can't do much to help you. I do advise you to get a restraining order against Jack coming into your home. Then if he ever does, you can call the police and we will come out and tell him to leave. Generally this is all it take in situation like this. Jack probably feels as though he has had his revenge and he'll leave you alone now."

"But Mr. Steven, Jack tried to kill us! Do you mean to tell me that the County can't help us? What are we supposed to do?"

"Come on, Mrs. Thompson, surely you being a parent know how quickly these little temper flareups come and go. Jack has

been taught his lesson and will get another taste of justice when he goes to trial for assaulting a police officer. You can be assured that Jack will be punished for what he did."

"I can't believe this! How do I know he won't get out of jail and come back to finish the job?"

"Well, Jack is already out of jail - he was bailed out the next morning. And you can see it has been several days already and he hasn't contacted you again, so most probably he has forgotten all about it. Why don't you go home put up your feet and have a nice tall drink and just relax. You'll feel lots better."

It was a little after seven that evening when Ellen's phone rang. It was Lloyd and he was on his way over and of course Karen was at Laurie's so they would have a chance to be alone. Ellen quickly brushed her hair and straightening up a few things around the house.

When Lloyd's car pulled into the driveway, Ellen was watching from the window and she ran out to meet him. He drove his car into the her garage and she put the overhead door down. It seemed to be an advisable precaution in the case of snoopy eyes. As soon as he was out of his car, they were in each other's arm. Knowing they had so little time they moved quickly into the bedroom, letting their passion for each other take precedence.

Relaxing in the warmth of the afterglow, Lloyd and Ellen lay close together, still touching, tracing lines and curves with their fingers, murmuring their love for each other.

Then Lloyd sat up, easing himself out of Ellen's arms and moved off to the bathroom. "You know, love, that maybe if you could control Karen more, she wouldn't get involved with such character. Not that I am criticizing you, of course, but you just put your foot down and forbid her to see such creeps as Jack, then things like this wouldn't happen. I would never let Susan get involved with such as him. My kids know my word is law, and they wouldn't dare to disobey me. Now, I know that a lot of your problems with your kids is the result of you marriage

breaking up, but if you would only try and sit on Karen a bit and make her behave, half your problems would be over."

"But Lloyd, Karen is just different from your kids. She has a personality that just won't conform to everyone else's ideas. I admire her free spirit although I agree with you that she should show some restraint in her life. I was held down so much as a child, that I probably have been remiss in allowing her so much freedom, but I don't feel it is wholly wrong either."

"Well, you can see what has happened from allowing her so much freedom. She runs off to Kansas because you are afraid she will run off anyway if you don't give permission, and then when that doesn't work out and she comes home, then Jack comes back for revenge. You have to crack down on her, for your own good and for hers."

"I know you are probably right. It will be tough, but I will try."

"I've got to run - Olivia's meeting is due to let our soon and it would be better if I were home when she gets home."

"I know, I know. Why does the time go by so quickly? How I wish you could stay longer. An hour just goes by so fast - "

Dressing quickly, Ellen then clung to Lloyd all the way to the door, and out in the garage, she opened the door for him to take his car out, waved goodbye, lowered the door and went back into the house.

She decided to make herself a cup of coffee, then decided that she was coffee'd out. She sat at the kitchen table, looking around the house, thinking about what she had been said. She had to admit to herself that she merely thought Karen was over at Laurie's, but she didn't know for sure.

The house seemed to creak and crack more tonight not that she was alone. She wondered if Jack was out there in the shrubs, maybe had even watched her and Lloyd together. She checked the locks on the doors and returned to the table. Her eyes darted from one place to another.

"Oh, this is impossible," she thought. "I can't just sit her and wait for Karen to come home, being scared to death."

She rushed to the closet. put in her coat and taking the car, drove over to the liquor store and bought a bottle of sherry.

"I know I shouldn't do this, but I need to relax - need to get up my nerve to talk to Karen. I'll just have one glass to settle my nerves and get up my courage. By then Karen will be home and we can sit down and discuss things."

Chapter IV

When the alarm went off at 6:45, Ellen awoke with a start. Her head spinning, she shakily rose to her feet and headed to the bathroom where she immediately took two aspirin. Looking in the mirror she saw circles under her eyes. "Well, what did you expect," she thought, "you were only going to have one glass of wine and I'll bet you drank most of the bottle - "

Guiltily, Ellen realized that she didn't remember going to bed the night before and she certainly couldn't remember talking with Karen like she had planned. Hurriedly she washed her face, then putting on her robe as she walked down the hall, she paused at Karen's open bedroom door. Karen was asleep, legs flung wide, and her room a total disaster.

"Karen, get up - it's getting late -"

Hearing Karen mumble, Ellen moved on into the kitchen. Just as she had thought, the wine bottle was almost empty. No wonder she felt so bad. The thought of food turned her stomach over, but she forced herself to drink half a glass of milk and ate a few crackers. Mouse, her black half Siamese cat, wound in and out around her feet until she opened a can of cat food and set a portion of the food on the floor. Smelling the cat food made her think seriously of emptying her stomach in the sink, but she swallowed several times and the feeling subsided.

She checked on Karen and seeing that she was up and getting clean underwear from the bureau, Ellen went back to her bedroom and got dressed.

"There's money on the table for lunch, Karen, and try to eat something sensible - please?" Ellen called as she moved out the back door to the garage.

"Yes, Mom," answered Karen, "see you tonight!"

At the office Ellen had trouble concentrating on her work. She kept thinking about Jack and Karen. How much had gone on that she didn't even know about? Maybe Lloyd was right and it was all her fault that this terrible beating had taken place – maybe Jack would come back and finish the job – if she had put

her foot down and forbidden Kern from going to Kansas, then thinks might have been different. How could she be sure that Jack wouldn't get back into the house? All he really had to do was to break a window and climb in. What if Karen forgot sometime to lock the door and Jack got in and was waiting for them to come home.

Driving home after work, Ellen was determined that as soon as she got in the door, she would sit down with Karen and have a long talk with her – explain just how she felt about things. Karen was seventeen and she would understand, she had to. But when Ellen got inside the house, the kitchen table had a note on it, “Mom, gone to visit Pop, will be back later, love, Karen.”

Without even thinking what she was doing, Ellen poured herself a glass of wine. Carrying the glass of wine, she checked all the rooms, looking into the closets and feeling a bit silly, she looked under the beds. Pouring another glass of wine, she rummaged in the cupboard for something to eat, finally opening a can of soup and heating it on the stove.

Ellen had eaten only a few spoonfuls of the soup when she decided to call her mother in Sacramento. Her mother lived alone in the house Ellen grew up in. Ellen wondered how her mother stood it all alone. Papa, Ellen's father, had been dead for over ten years now, and Ellen wondered how her mother managed each night. Was she afraid?

“Hi, Mama, I just thought I would call and talk with you for a bit.”

“What's wrong Ellen, you don't just call to talk!”

“It's OK now, Mama, but there as some trouble this weekend. Jack came over and he got kind of rought. He was all doped up on beer and pills and he had the crazy idea and oh, Mama, it was so awful –”

“Ellen, stop crying! I can't understand what you are saying. Are you and Karen all right?”

“Yes, Mama, I'm just upset, that's all. Are you ever afraid to be alone?”

Ellen, you just aren't making much sense. I gather that Jack came over and did something to upset you. Have you been drinking? Your voice sounds funny!"

"I've only had one glass of wine, Mama, honest," said Ellen. And then she tried to tell her mother what had happened over the weekend. When she had finished, there was a silence and the her mother spoke.

"Ellen, I don't like to say this, but I think you will have to admit that you have brought this onto yourself. If you hadn't broken up with Warren, this never would have happened. If there was a man in the house, Jack never would have come over. And furthermore, if Warren were still around Karen wouldn't have gotten involved with Jack in the first place. You have to take better care of her. She is still a minor and you don't seem to have any control over her. You have got to sit on her and make her behave – do you hear me, Ellen?"

"Yes, Mama, I know you are right," Ellen sighed. "I'll talk to her tonight. Thanks for the advice. Got to run now, I think I can her her coming up the walk. Bye Mama!"

Laying her head on the table, Ellen let her tears drip onto the polished surface. What had happened that her life had turned out so awful?

Ellen had been born the day the banks closed in the midst of the depression. Ellen's mother liked to tell the story of how she was in labor and trying to get admitted to the hospital, but the hospital wouldn't take a check. Her husband was home drunk on the sofa and she had almost been forced to have Ellen on the hospital lawn before they took pity on her and let her in. Ellen had an older brother and like most kids, they teased and fought with each other. Ellen's mother used to say that she never wanted children, didn't even like them and they weren't making it any easier for her. When Ellen was ten she skipped a grade in school, making her a year younger than the others in her class. While her parents were very proud that she had moved up a grade, they reminded her constantly that she was a year younger than the rest of her friends, so she wasn't old enough to be doing

what they were doing. Maybe next year. Ellen gradually became withdrawn, changing from a sturdy outgoing child to an awkward, gangling and extremely shy teenager.

When Ellen was 16, she met Warren Thompson. Warren was bright and very outgoing and Ellen was amazed that he took a liking to her. They went together for two years and had plans for marriage when the Korean War broke out and Warren enlisted, rather than be drafted. Ellen was devastated when Warren left, and she wandered around in a daze. Shortly after he was shipped overseas to Korea, she quit college and went to work for a small firm, typing and answering the phone. Two years later when Warren came home, Ellen was faithfully waiting for him. Warren had changed and now seemed withdrawn, but Ellen feeling frantic that she would be an old maid, pushed for marriage. Her home life had deteriorated due to her mother and father arguing and threatening divorce and she felt as though this was her last chance to leave home. She loved Warren and couldn't imagine doing anything else but spending the rest of her life with him. One night when Warren was on leave and Ellen's parents were out, they made love on the living room sofa. Shortly after that, Warren asked Ellen to marry him and a few months later on a steamy hot day in September, they were married.

Marriage was a shock to Ellen. She had thought it would be all love and affection, but it turned out to be worrying about what to have for dinner, cleaning and being sick to her stomach as she got pregnant immediately. Almost nine months to the day after they were married, Kelly was born, followed two years later by Karen. Ellen loved her babies and she loved her husband, but he didn't seem to care much for her. He never wanted to make love. There always seemed to be an excuse – the children might hear, the weather was too hot, he had too much on his mind. The excuses were endless, so Ellen gradually gave up. When the children both in school, Ellen went back to work. At night she would have a glass of wine while she was fixing dinner, then more wine during dinner and several more

glasses trying to relax so she could go to sleep. Quite a few times she got drunk and one time during her drunkenness, Warren lost his temper at her and punched her on the nose. Ellen had been in such bad shape that she didn't remember the blow. It was on arising the next morning that she found she had a very sore nose and two black eyes. Warren was very quick to explain in detail exactly what had happened and to inform her how very disgusted he was with her. Several months later, Warren moved out and Ellen stopped drinking. After she had been sober for four months, she filed for divorce and shortly after the divorce was final, Lloyd came into her life, filling the void. He told her she was beautiful – something no one had ever told her – and that he loved her – something else no one had ever told her. But he was married and would not or could not leave his wife. For a while things went smoothly, then Kelly started in. Kelly had always be an aggressive child and when he became a teenager her seemed to swagger and boast constantly. He came home drunk, even got braze about smoking pot in his room. There were so many boys coming and going and so much of the smell in the air, that Ellen was afraid he was dealing. She warned him to quit and after warning him three times, she had him busted. When Karen told her how Kelly had been hitting her and showed her the bruises, and lastly the hole punched through the bathroom door, Ellen felt that she had no choice. She told him he would have to live with his father, that she would not tolerate such behavior in her house. Giving up on Kelly made Ellen feel like a failure with her son. It also cut down on the child support which mad finance rather tough. She was finding that it took all her salary to pay the bills, never leaving anything for her recreation.

Ellen got up from the table, took her bowl over to the sink and rinsed it. She looked at the wine glass in her hand, then pushed it far away in a corner of the sink. Hearing Karen's voice then giggles, she went to the door. Karen was coming up the walk with a strange girl.

“Hi, Mom, this is Angela.”

“Hi, Angela, how are you?”

“Hi, Mrs. Thompson, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Mom, I need to ask you a really big favor. I don’t want you to say anything for a while – just think it over and the please, please say ‘yes’,” begged Karen, “You see, Angela just got thrown out of her home by her mom. Angie’s mom in on welfare and so she gets money from the county for every kid under 18 – well Angie just turned 18, and now her mom says she has to live somewhere else, and I was thinking that since we have so much room and Kelly’s room is vacant, and since Angie really needs someplace to stay and since Angie can be such a big help around here. Why, we will pitch in and do all the work for you like mowing the the lawn and weeding. We’ll even do the dishes ad vacuuming! Angie has no place to go, Mom, oh, please, Mom, please -”

Ellen looked at Angie, long dark hair, bright blue eyes, wearing jeans and tee shirt, sandals even in winter, and she thought her heart would break thinking of how this child had been pushed out of her home.

“Of course she can stay – it will be nice to have someone else in the house,” said Ellen.

“Oh, thank you, Mom, I love you!” cried Karen.

“Gosh, thanks a heap, Mrs. Thompson! I promise you, you won’t be sorry. I’ll work really hard for you!”

“Angie, let’s get one thing straight – don’t call me Mrs. Thompson – so long as you want to live her, you have a place to stay – and why don’t you call me ‘Mom’? I think I would really like that, Said Ellen.

“Gee, I don’t know what to say – Mom -” said Angie.

Then all three women hugged each other, tears running down their faces.

Chapter V

The first few days after Angie's arrival went smoothly. Ellen came home from work to find the lawn mowed and the house neat and tidy. Fresh cookies were baked and eaten. Angie even made dinner one night making a delicious meatloaf containing zucchini from the garden.

One night, however, Ellen came home to find no one home, dirty dishes in the sink and makeup scattered all over the kitchen table. A few hours later the girls came in, chattering, apologizing for the mess, then leaving immediately after they had changed clothes, not bothering to clean up the mess they had made.

"Oh, well, they are so young," thought Ellen as she cleaned up.

The pattern had been set though and Ellen found her life changed. Now she either came home to an empty house or a house filled and overflowing with teenagers – stereo blasting away so loud one couldn't even think. Several times Ellen couldn't get near her own garage to put away her car, but had to park several houses away, having to wait to house her car until someone left. Her phone was always in use and Lloyd complained that he could never call Ellen as the line was always busy. Ellen found that her clothes were no longer clean and fresh, but had been worn by someone, or just weren't there. When her jewelry started to disappear, she put her foot down. She fussed at Angie and Karen and the promised, but the situation continued. Finally in desperation, Ellen purchased a lock for her bedroom door. She hated to resort to such a measure, but enough was enough.

One evening after a trying day at the office, Ellen came home to find the house blasting away with rock music and filled with smoke. Great hunking boys were sprawled all over the living room and the kitchen. Angie and Karen were making pizza in the kitchen and there seemed to be tomato paste and cheese everywhere. Ellen retreated to her bedroom, locked the door and sat on her bed and drank half a bottle of wine. Mouse, her black

cat, came out from under the bed and joined her, curling up next to her as she sipped the wine.

The next morning, she tried to wake the girls, but they were too tired to get up. Karen almost spit at her when she told her to get up. “Oh,oh,” thought Ellen, “that’s not like Karen,” and checking the calendar, she noted that Karen’s period was due. So, putting it down to premenstrual tension, Ellen drove off to work, feeling squeamish from last night’s wine, and leaving a note to the girls to clean up the mess.

When she got home that evening the house was quiet even though the girls were home. Both girls were in their respective bedroom, curtains drawn and the stereo on very low. Looking into Karen’s room, she saw Karen fidgeting with a paint by numbers kit. Seeing her mother at the door, Karen knocked the set to the floor, spilling the paint. Ellen eased out the door, went to her bathroom and got a valium. Almost every month just before her period, Karen went into the extreme agitated state where nothing suited her. When the moon was right, the madness seemed to come out. Remembering how tense she used to get, before her hysterectomy, Ellen could sympathize with Karen and fervently hoped that this month would be easier for Karen. She went back onto Karen’s room and gave her the valium with a glass of water. Karen glared at her, but she took the pill.

Softly opening Angie’s door, she saw that the girl was asleep so she tiptoed out and went into the kitchen to fix dinner. “Well,” she thought, “guess I will wait again to tell the girls they have to do better around here.”

Gradually Ellen began to drink more and more. There didn’t seem to be anything else to do when she got home at night. Almost every night there was a crowd and stranger in her home. When she got up in the morning she would find that some of the stranger had spend the night on her living room floor. Angie didn’t seem to care who slept in her bed, with or without her. Karen had her steady boyfriend, Steve, and Ellen knew they slept together. She hadn’t seen it, but she was positive they

were. Karen asked to be taken to the doctor so she could get the pill and Ellen had finally relented. It was the doctor that convinced her when he stated that he would rather give Karen the pill than to have to do an abortion on her. Feeling completely helpless about the situation around her, Ellen retreated behind her locked bedroom door every night and drank.

Ellen started calling in sick on Monday mornings. When she did come to work on Tuesdays, she was weak and shaky. She couldn't sleep at night until she got drunk and then she was so sick in the mornings she couldn't get out of bed.

Karen noticed the change in her mother. She and Angie discussed it and followed Ellen around, trying to help her, trying to figure out what was troubling her. But they couldn't make sense out of it when Ellen was drunk, she would sit and cry, but never make any intelligent statements. When she was sober, she didn't want to talk at all. Karen could hear her mother behind her locked bedroom door, her breathing irregular, almost stopping at time and she grew frightened.

Finally she called her father. "Pop," she said, "Mom is getting really bad. She drinks all the time and I don't know what to do. She seems to be upset about that day that Jack was here, but that was over a month ago. Why would she still be upset about that? She locks herself in her room and I am scared she will die there. Please, Pop, help me!"

"Sorry, pumpkin, there isn't a thing I can do. We're not married anymore and I doubt if she would talk to me anyway. I'd probably make things worse. You will have to face up the fact that your mother is an alcoholic and until she wants help for her problem, there isn't anything you can do," replied Warren.

In desperation, Karen got Steve to take the hinges off Ellen's bedroom door, removing the door, lock and all.

When Ellen came home, carrying a sack with her night's supply of wine, her bedroom was wide open and she realized her refuge was gone.

Ellen soon found that even when she was in bed with the lights out, that she could expect company. Visitor in the house

wandered through to used her bathroom as the other one was occupied, they came in to see if so and so was in there, and Karen came in constantly so to see how she was.

One night Ellen woke from a sound sleep, sensing a presence; Groggily opening her eyes, she saw a figure sitting on her bed. It was Kelly.

“How ya doing, Mom?” he asked. “I like a beer?”

“Kelly, what are you doing here?” Outside the room were the usual sounds of stereo, radio and shouting. She could here someone squealing – sounded like Angie. Puzzled, she looked back and Kelly, he arm outreached with a can of beer. The beer looked good and she knew it would quench her thirst, so she took it.

“I thought I would drop by and see you, Mom, kind of see how you were doing and all that stuff – how about a kiss for your son?” And abruptly, he leaned over, pinning Ellen between his arms and kissed her on the mouth.

Sputtering, Ellen cried out, “What are you doing?”

“Oh, come on, Mom, what’s a little kiss? I hear you have been putting out all sort of things lately. I figure it is time for my share!” and as he spoke her squeezed her breast.

“Kelly, for God’s sake, I am your mother!”

“So what? Lot’s of guys do it with their mothers. What difference does it make who you do it with? I need it - “

Kelly pinned Ellen with one muscular hand and ripped the bed clothes off her with the other. “Now be quiet or you’ll get some more of what Jack dished out to you -”

“no, no, no” moaned Ellen. “You can’t!”

Prying her legs apart and with this clothes still one, he entered her. A few minutes later he rose and from his sobbing mother, zipped up his pants and looked down at her.

“Here, Mom, have some more beer. Sorry I can’t stay longer, but don’t you worry, I’ll come back and see you again!”

Out in the hall, Kelly rand into Karen coming in to check on her mother. “Don’t worry, Karen, I just checked her – she’s

OK.” As he left the house, Kelly thought to himself, “Now we’re even, Mom.”

Chapter VI

Ellen was in agony. It had to be some horrible nightmare. It could not be true. Little girls were assaulted by step-fathers or uncles and maybe even by a sick father, but sons did not assault their mothers. They didn't, they didn't. But her body told her it was true. The soreness in her vagina told her it was true.

Retching, shaking, she tried to get control of herself. She wanted to die. She was so ashamed.

She took a valium and laid back down for a while. She would not allow herself to think about it. When her stomach had calmed, she slowly got dressed, fixed her hair the best she could and without waking the girls, left for work.

She met Lloyd out in the parking lot. She didn't want to see him but he was waiting for her. When she got out of her car, he grabbed her arm, playfully shaking it. Ellen's eyes went wide with fear, then relaxed.

"Whatever is wrong, Ellen?" asked Lloyd. "Nothing can be as bad as all that!"

"Yes it is," said Ellen, and she slowly told him what had happened, not sparing any details.

"Why, I just can't believe that a son would do that to his own mother," said Lloyd.

"Neither did I until now," replied Ellen, "but I now know what they mean when they say" and she choked, "motherfucker-"

"But why didn't you yell? Why didn't you fight him?"

"Because I couldn't yell above all that noise – because I was afraid of being beaten again!"

Lloyd gently patted her hand, trying to calm her. Then after a few moments, he asked, "But tell me, I know this sounds kind of silly, and of course you didn't, but, well, what did it feel like? What I mean is, did you get any enjoyment from the act?"

"Oh, my God! How could you say such a thing!" sobbed Ellen, and she fled to the office restroom, slamming the door behind her.

A few minutes later Cecelia came in the restroom. Tearfully Ellen told her friend what had happened. Cecelia hugged Ellen to her ample bosom, “You poor thing,” she murmured. “You stay here, I’ll be right back!”

When Cecelia came back in, she took Ellen by the arm and said “Come on, let’s go. I spoke to Mr. Early, told him you had had a family problem and were terribly upset and that I was going to let you stay at my house for the day – so I’m going to take you home with me right now. You can rest and relax all day in peace and quiet – no one to bother you. I’ll be home after five and we’ll have dinner and have a nice long talk. Spend the weekend with me and get yourself back together. I’ll call Karen and let her know where you are.”

“Cecelia, you are so good to me, thanks!” sobbed Ellen.

Ten minutes later they arrived at Cecelia’s home. The house was in a tract of homes about 15 years old with an older, settle look to the neighborhood of moderately priced dwellings. Cecelia’s house was surrounded by a redwood fence, giving it a private appearance. Inside the fence was a colorful garden of roses, just beginning to bloom and giving out a delightful fragrance. A large oak tree dominated the back yard under which was a bench and a birdbath made of concrete.

Inside the home was modest but well kept up. Since Ellen had been over to Cecelia’s home many times, Cecelia told her to make herself at home and dashed back to work. Ellen wandered out into the garden and sat on the bench under the old oak tree. How very peaceful and serene the world seemed with the birds chattering in the tree and a few bees buzzing around the flowers. Ellen couldn’t help but compare it with her own home where noise and confusion seemed to reign supreme. Still, Cecelia had told Ellen many times how lonely she was since her husband had died. Ellen was never lonely lately. There seemed to be so many kids around all the time, that she yearned to be alone. Not even her bedroom was a place to be lone to gather her thoughts. A tear trickled down her cheek as she thought of her bedroom.

Time heals all, everyone was always saying, but Ellen wondered if time would ever heal this wound.

Ellen went back into the house and settled down on the sofa, curling up under the soft blanket Cecelia had provided for her. Tired as she was, she could not sleep. Her mind felt like a ping-pong ball, bouncing everywhere – Kelly, Karen, Lloyd, work, Jack, and Kelly, always back to Kelly, over and over again. Why did he do it? God must be punishing her for something – if only she could undo that horrible night. Ellen felt too jumpy to sleep. She got up and went out to the kitchen. Maybe she would have a little glass of wine or something and that would help her to sleep. But the refrigerator held everything but wine or beer and the cupboard proved to be fruitless as far as wine went too. Opening one drawer, Ellen found some cooking extracts and remembered that they contained alcohol too. Shaking, she looked at each one and decided on the chocolate extract. Taking off the top and slowly tasting it, she found it delicious! After drinking most of the bottle, she replaced it in the drawer and went back to the sofa where she laid down and finally slept.

Cecelia came home shortly after five and Ellen was surprised that she had slept the day through. She felt shaky and her mouth was dry. When she went into the bathroom to comb her hair, she was shocked at her appearance in the mirror. Her hair was limp and lifeless and her eyes had a funny look to them. Ellen told herself she was nuts and went back to the kitchen to help with dinner. Cecelia prepared a simple dinner of baked chicken, buttered noodles and green peas and when she placed it on the table, she had an idea so she went to the garage and got a bottle of wine and brought it to the table. She didn't normally drink, but this seemed like a good time to have a little wine and let Ellen loosen up.

After dinner, Ellen and Cecelia sat in the living room and sipped the rest of the wine, Ellen slowly telling Cecelia how worried she was about Karen, about how she was afraid that Jack would come back and now this thing with Kelly.

“You poor thing,” consoled Cecelia, “it is too much for anyone to have to bear. No wonder you have felt so bad! But surely everything will change around for you now. With Angie in the house, you won’t have to worry about Jack coming over, but as far as Kelly goes, well, that is a tough one. Say, have you thought you might get VD from him? Oh, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry – now I’ve upset you again!”

“No, Cecelia, don’t worry about it. I’m glad you mentioned it as I hadn’t thought about that at all. I must go down and get checked, but I don’t have the nerve to go to Dr. Childers.” said Ellen.

“Well, that’s easy,” said Cecelia. “All you have to do is go to the County Clinic. Then no one will have to know – they will be all strangers to you and you won’t have to be so embarrassed! You can dash in on Monday during lunch and no one will be the wiser – then when it comes back negative, you can forget the whole thing!”

“You’re right,” replied Ellen. “It makes me feel better that it will be so easy.”

The two women stayed up talking until midnight, then turned in. Waking up at four in the morning, Ellen tossed and turned. She hated to wake Cecelia, so she finally tiptoed out to the kitchen, opened the spice drawer in the dark and felt for the extract bottles. Opening one, she smelled it – it was vanilla. Slowly she sipped on the vanilla, standing in the middle of the kitchen bathed in moonlight. She really would have to cut down on her drinking. It was making her sick and the craving was becoming too much, but still, what did she expect after all that she had been through. It was just a good case of nerves and she would get over it. “Time heals and all that stuff,” she thought.

In the morning, Ellen bade Cecelia goodbye, thanking her profusely for all her help, and drove home. Opening the kitchen door, she was greeted by Karen and Angie.

“Oh, look, Mom, look what Angie got at the flea market!” cried Karen.

And nestled in Angie’s arms was a tiny yellow duck.

“But Karen, I know it is adorable, but what will Mouse do with it? Mouse like birds, you know, and this is just another bird to her!”

“Don’t worry, Mom,” said Angie. “We have it all figured out. I have a cage for Daffy in my room and we let him play in the bathtub! You should see it – he has the best time in the tub!”

“I can imagine,” said Ellen.

“Anyway, Mom, I promise I will take care of Daffy and you won’t have to worry about a thing,” promised Angie.

Ellen wondered to herself how long the little duck would last. Mouse was a good hunter and the girls would have to be very careful or Daffy would be Mouse’s dinner. As she went past the girls bathroom, she groaned. She could smell duck even before she saw the mess. “Get in here and clean this bathroom, girls,” she called, retreating to her own room.

Monday at her lunch break, Ellen drove over the County VD Clinic. There she was instructed to take a number and wait on a bench. The room was filled with teenagers and Ellen felt very much out of place, but she was grateful that they used the number system instead of names. It was bad enough that they saw her face. After waiting only a few minutes, she was called into an examining room. A nurse came in with a pad and pen and asked questions – who was her contact, had she had intercourse with anyone else since the incident, and her age and relationship to the one who had assaulted her. Ellen remained calm outward, but her heart was pounding. She realized that she was scared to death and extremely embarrassed. The examination was brief and Ellen was told she would be called in three day with the results. Everyone was very nonchalant in the clinic and Ellen guessed that they had probably heard just about everything, but still she wondered if they have ever had a case like hers before.

Three days later, Ellen received a phone call from the clinic advising her that her test was negative. Hanging up the phone, Ellen smiled for the first time in three days.

That evening after dinner Ellen was watching television and the girls were cleaning up the kitchen, the doorbell rang. Ellen opened the drapes and looked out the window to the porch to see who was at the door. A middle aged man, neat appearing, was at the door. Since he was carrying a brief case, Ellen surmised that he was a salesman of some type and answered the door.

“Ellen Thompson?” asked the man.

“Yes, I’m Ellen Thompson,” replied Ellen.

“Here you are, ma’am,” the man said, giving her a paper, “and is Karen Thompson also here?”

Puzzled, Ellen looked at the paper the man had handed her. Opening it, she saw at the top of the page “Summons” and reading further saw that it was a summon for her to appear as a witness at the trial of the County of Santa Clara vs. Jack aka John Michaels.

“Karen,” she called, but there was no answer. “Excuse me for a moment,” she said. Going into the kitchen Ellen found that the girls were gone. She checked their rooms, but they weren’t there.

Returning to the front door, Ellen told the man that she would have Karen get in touch with him or he could come back later as her daughter didn’t seem to be at home at the moment.

Half an hour later, Karen and Angie came home via the patio door. “Let’s see it, Mom,” said Karen.

“You will have to call this number so you can have your summons,” said Ellen, handing hers over to the girls to read.

“Not on your life, Mom,” replied Karen. “There’s no way that I will testify against Jack!”

“Karen, how can you say such a thing? For heaven’s sake, why not? Are you crazy or something?”

“I’d have to be crazy to go to court! There is no way I can be a snitch on Jack – why none of my friends would ever speak to me again if I did something like that.”

“That’s right, Mom,” said Angie, chiming in, “the other kids would ban Karen if she talked with the pigs about Jack. Besides

Jack's friends would probably get even and our lives wouldn't be worth shit!"

"I can't believe this 'code' of yours! You can't let Jack get away with what he did! If you don't testify and he goes free, he will just do it over and over again. Do you want it on your conscience that he is out feeling free to beat someone else, just because you feel it is against you 'code' to speak up?"

"Mom," said Karen, "you just don't understand how things are. If I do testify, Jack will make it worse for me. It just isn't worth it – and you shouldn't testify either. It will make Jack mad if you do – besides, it is the pigs complaint, not ours. Remember that they wouldn't let use bring charges on Jack, just they could!"

"I don't care," replied Ellen. "We must have justice – even if we have to do it this way – testifying for the police, not pigs, so Jack can be punished. You will see that I am right. The world would be a jungle without the law and we must take advantage of it."

"Suit yourself, Mom," replied Karen, as Angie stood there nodding her head, "but don't blame me if something awful happens!"

Shaking her head in disbelief, Ellen went back to her bedroom and laid down on the bed. She laid there for a few minutes, then reached under the bed and pulled out a bottle of cherry hidden next to the headboard. Getting a glass from the bathroom, she poured herself a full glassful and slowly and deliberately drank it all.

Chapter VII

The trial was set for the following Thursday. That morning Ellen woke up with a feeling of dread, as though something awful was going to happen. “Nonsense,” she thought, “I really am being silly! This is going to be my day of triumph.” But she couldn’t put aside the feeling of premonition. - premonition that this day was not going to be a good day. It certainly looked pretty out, a bright June morning, already warm even at seven in the morning.

Ellen heard Daffy sounding off in Angie’s room. She wondered if he had any food. Slowly opening the door, she peeped in and found Angie’s bed empty – the she checked Karen;s room next door and found her bed empty too. “Those girls had sneaked out in the night and I hadn’t even heard them leave. They must have guessed that I would put pressure on Karen in the morning to go to the trial to testify so they had left to avoid the conflict. Well, they were absolutely right,” thought Ellen, “because that was exactly what I had panned to do! Looks like they won again.”

She wen in and fed Daffy. The little yellow duck was growing like a weed – already the down was being replaced with feathers. He looked as though he doubled his size and soon would be too big for the cage. Mouse followed her into the room and watched the proceeding, trying to put her paw into the cage while Daffy quacked loudly.

Ellen ate a light breakfast, then carefully dressed in brown slightly flared skirt and all plain white blouse. White heels and a small pair of earrings for her pierced ears and she was ready to go. As she appraised herself in the long mirror, seeing a slender woman with good legs and eyes, but that was about all. Her breasts were small, her hands large and bony and has a nervous tic by her left eye. Sighing, she took a valium to calm down.

Ellen reached the courthouse a few minutes before 10 and was met at the entrance by Officer Johnson who she

remembered as being one of the police at the house. He guided her over to a bench and they sat down together.

Mrs. Thompson, I know you are probably nervous about this. But it is really very simple. We just want you to tell your story exactly how it happened. Don't volunteer anything other than what actually happened. The deputy district attorney will question you first and the the defense attorney will have a chance to ask you his questions. You are to remain out here in the corridor until you are called."

"But," Ellen interrupted, "you mean I can't listen to the trial?"

"No, witnesses are not allowed to sit in the audience. The idea is that you will not be influenced by what is being said and thus will tell your story correctly. Don't worry, everything is going to be fine."

"But where is Jack? He won't be able to get near me, will he? I can't tell you how much I have been afraid for myself and for my daughter since that day –"

"Just try and stay calm, Mrs. Thompson. It should only be a few minutes before we call on you. Please stay right here – don't wander off. We really need your testimony."

"OK, I'll stay right here, but I sure home this doesn't take too long," replied Ellen.

Nearly an hour later, Ellen was finally called to the stand. Her hands trembled and her voice shook as she gave her oath. After she sat down, she glanced up at the jury. "Oh, my, the judge is Harry!" she thought, referring to a former neighbor of hers who had moved away over two years previously. She had known he was now a judge, but it never crossed her mind that he might be the judge at Jack's trial.

"Now, Mrs. Thompson, I want you to tell the Court in your own words what was happening in your home when the pplice entered. What I mean is, please tell the Court just where everyone in question was at that particular time."

"Well, when the police came into my home, I was on the kitchen floor and so was my daughter Karen. I guess Jack was

standing over us, but I couldn't see him as I was facing the door.”

“And then what happened when the officers came into the room. Please tell us what you saw and heard from that moment on.”

“Well, one of the said, 'Everyone please go outside so we can talk this over' then Karen and I got up from the floor and she ran outside.”

“Your daughter ran outside?”

“Yes, she did. Before I could move very far, Jack yelled at the officer and lunged at him and they struggled. He grabbed at the his shirt and tore off his tie and his badge. I remember seeing it fly across the room, the badge that is. Then the other officers jumped on Jack and they got him on the floor.”

“That's fine, Mrs. Thompson, not further questions.”

The skinny young man sitting next to Jack rose and came towards Ellen, holding a paper in his hand.

“Mrs. Thompson, have you known Jack Michaels for long, that is how long have you know Jack Michaels?”

“Well, I guess it has been about a year now.”

“And has been frequently in your home?”

Yes, he was dating my daughter Karen for a while.”

“And what happened to that relationship, Mrs. Thompson?”

“Well, I don't really know. They went to Kansas together, but Karen called me and wanted to come home, so I sent her a ticket.”

“I see, but then, Mrs. Thompson, Jack had been in your home quite a number of occasions, isn't that correct?”

“Yes, he had.”

The defense attorney paused, walked back to the table where Jack was sitting, leaned down and talked briefly with Jack. Then, still standing next to Jack, he asked, “Isn't it true, Mrs. Thompson, that you and Jack Michaels were having sexual intercourse and this is what caused the breakup between him and your daughter?”

Horrified by what she had heard, stunned and shocked, Ellen rose to her feet and screamed, “NO! That is not true! Never, never!”

“The witness is excused,” said the young attorney.

“You may step down, Mrs. Thompson,” said the former neighbor now Judge Harry Rayburn.

A bailiff took her arm and guided her from the courtroom.

“Can’t I stay – can’t I see what happens now,” pleaded Ellen.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but witnesses must leave the courtroom.”

Ellen stumbled through the swinging door and sat down on the first bench she saw. Sobbing, she buried her face in her hands. “How awful, awful,” she thought, “and to think that Harry heard all that! I feel so ashamed!”

“Poor Ellen,” said Warren, “you really have gotten yourself into a mess.”

“Warren, what are you doing here? Did you hear that – were you inside and heard that? It just isn’t true, Warren, it just isn’t true!”

“Of course it isn’t. No one will believe that, they were just trying to discredit you as a witness. Don’t take it so hard. Karen told me that the trial was today and I wanted to see what would happen to Jack, that is why I came.”

Just then the doors to the courtroom swung open and people started coming out. Officer Johnson came through with a group of other officers and came over to Ellen.

“Thanks, Mrs. Thompson. You were fine.”

“But what happened, is Jack going to jail now?”

“No, but the judge did bind him over from municipal court to the superior court so that show he thinks there is something to the complaint. Anyway, we’ll get him next time!”

“Next time?” asked Ellen.

“Oh yes, next time. The superior court trial will probably come up in about a month – and we will need your testimony then too. Now don’t worry about Jack’s attorney, he is just a green public defender and he was trying anything he could. Now

you take it easy Mrs. Thompson, and we'll see you in a month of so."

"Oh, God, I can't believe this!" cried Ellen. "How much more do I have to do?"

"Ellen, let's go for a little drive together. I think you need to get yourself together," Said Warren. "Don't worry, I won't pester you, I think you need some time to yourself."

Warren and Ellen drove around for almost an hour, not saying much, just looking at the sunny fields filled with placid coes and sheep. "How simple everything looks out here in the country," Ellen thought.

Warren stopped the care taking one of Ellen's hands, he said, "Ellen, Karen has been very worried about you. I think you need a change form the problems of that house. Now I know you and I are divorced, but I hope we are past the bitterness of it all and can act like sensible human beings. What I am suggesting is that you come up to my place in the hills for a few days. I will be at work all day and you can be completely alone. You can sleep in the spare bedroom and I won't even talk to you when I come home, if you like. So, why don't you give it a try?"

"Thank you Warren, that is very nice of you, but I don't know-"

"I think it will do wonders for you, Ellen, and you need to have things change for you."

"Well, you're certainly right about that – maybe I am crazy, but I am going to take you up on your offer. Thank you, Warren."

That evening after a simple dinner prepared by Warren, Ellen excused herself and went to bed in the tiny guestroom of Warren's cabin in the hills. She was glad that she had thought to bring her valium. After taking one, she left the bottle and a glass of water by the bed and climbed under the covers. The trees loomed dark and mysterious outside the window, but Ellen was too tired after the long day and quickly fell asleep. A little after three in the morning, she woke up shaking and immediately

took another valium, forcing herself to lie still until the drug took effect.

After Warren had left for work, Ellen idly walked around the cabin. She sat and read for a while, then grew restless. He was always saying she was an alcoholic and she probably figured that up here in the woods she would find it harder to get a drink. Well, she would show him, and slipping on her sweater, and taking her purse, she set out on the road. After walking nearly two miles, she came across the little country store she had remembered. She felt very gleeful after purchasing the bottle of wine. “I’ll show him, she thought. “I’ll have my drink and my solitude too.”

She drank a little wine on the way back to the cabin, sitting under a large pine tree. The birds twittered and chattered and she air smelled as fresh and clean. How beautiful that world was in the calm quiet of the woods.

When she got back to the cabin, she hid the bottle of wine under her mattress and being careful to brush her teeth before Warren came home to hide the smell of the wine, she felt very proud of herself. She wasn’t a drunk, she just needed to cut down a little and she would.

The next day she took another walk and got another bottle of wine. The first empty bottle she threw in the woods. “No one would ever find it all that shrubby. Why I’ll bet the vines grow over it in just a few days,” she thought.

In spite of feeling so clever about hiding her drinking from Warren, Ellen actually did cut down from her usual amount of wine and after three days in the mountains, she was feeling much better and was able to go home again, ready to face her world. Warren looked pleased as he said goodbye to her, firmly convinced that he had started her on the road to recovery.

Ellen giggled all the way home. Still she did feel good. She guessed she had been a little careless about what she was eating and she probably had been drinking too much, but she had good reason to drink. It must have been the clean mountain air that made her feel so much better. Well, now she really must have a

long talk with Karen and with Angie and get them straightened out. They would hate the new rules around the house and they had better be obeyed. From now on, Ellen was going to be in charge and the girls had better shape up. She would just have to get tough with them and let them know she was boss. “Yes,” she thought, “now everything will be really better!”

Chapter VIII

“Mom! Mom!”

Karen ran out to meet her mother as she drove up the driveway. She was jumping up and down waving a paper. “Mom, I got it!”

Getting out of the car and coming over to Karen, Ellen looked at the paper in Karen’s hand. It was her driver’s license – now Karen was a legal driver.

“Pop went with me while I took the test, isn’t that great? How I can drive all by myself!”

“But Karen, I will have to change the insurance. I’m not sure I can afford that extra amount for another driver.”

“Don’t worry, Mom, that’s the other part of the news! I got a job! I start on Saturday, I’ll work after school when school starts, but I can work 20 hours or maybe even 30 hours a week during the summer. I’ll have my own money and I can pay for the insurance, my clothes and gas, and anything I want – won’t that be great, Mom? Aren’t you happy for me?”

“But Karen, I don’t understand, just where are you going to work and what sort of work are you going to do. And I don’t know about working once school starts again – your grades aren’t very good, you know.”

“I know, Mom, but I’ll be better, I promise! The job is over at the Smilin’ Pup and I start out in the kitchen – you know, chopping lettuce, peeling potatoes and onions, that sort of thing. Oh, it will be fun! Just think of all the guys I’ll meet! Oh, and Mom, can you lend me twenty bucks until payday? I have to get a white uniform – aren’t you pleased, Mom?”

“Yes, I’m happy for you, Karen, I just hope it doesn’t turn out to be too much for you!”

Karen grabbed her mother’s hands and swung her around in a circle, Angie stood by, grinning.

“Oh, Mom, can I take the Datsun out of a spin? I want to drive over to Laurie’s and show her my license! Mom, I’m so happy! Do you think you could start taking the old MG to work

so I could have the Datsun? I know you don't want me to drive the MG – so the Datsun could sort of be my car. I want to go over to Laurie's right now, but then I'll come back and wash that vacuum the Datsun out. I want it to look super!"

"Karen, we'll try it for a while. But I want you to understand that if I need the Datsun, I will have to take it. The MG is not very dependable – it's old and has a habit of breaking down. After all, I have to do to work so we can keep a roof over our heads and I may need to use the Datsun."

"Anything you say, Mom, anything you say" cried Karen and she and Angie piled into the Datsun and took off down the street to Laurie's house.

Going into the garage, Ellen removed the heavy cover from the MG. She kept it covered to prevent scratches and to keep the cat foot prints off the shiny paint. The MG was her pride. Before she had gone to work full time, Ellen had sewed for a few friends. She has always been clever with her hands and had been taught to sew by her mother. She had started sewing for friends, helping them out with a project, then ending up with a small business. She would tuck the few dollars away in a drawer, becoming amazed how the money grew.

The small source of income gave her a sense of pride. She would use it to buy Christmas and birthday gifts, even bought the living room sofa. Then she saw the old MG sitting on a used car lot. It was the car of her dreams and she wanted it in the worst way. Plunking down her hard earned dollars, she purchased the MG, British racing green, wire wheels, and it immediately broke down. Warren tinkered with it, took it to a mechanic who put in a new clutch rod, then finally a transmission. Warren had called it Ellen's Folly, but she loved it. Still it had its quirks and so she seldom drove it to work.

Lovingly, Ellen ran her fingers over the fender, then slipped into the driver's seat and started the engine. When she had the engine running, she put the top down and eased it out of the garage. The sun was warm and it was heavenly to drive around with the top down. The car was working perfectly, had no

strange sounds, so Ellen drove it back home and figured that everything would work out just fine.

The arrangement with the cars worked out and Ellen, Karen and Angie soon fell into a routine with Ellen leaving in the morning with the girls sound asleep and the girls leaving in the evening as Ellen was coming home from work. Around ten in the evening when Ellen was ready for bed, the girls would return with a gang. The stereo and TV would be turned on, the cigarettes were lit and the kitchen turned into shambles. Ellen never did get a chance to talk to the girls as they were not around when she felt strong enough to make her point. By the time the girls came home, Ellen was in bed and half drunk, trying to get to sleep. Ellen found it harder and harder to go to work in the mornings. Her stomach rebelled at the thought of food, so she went without. By ten in the morning she was shaking and would try to eat either a candy bar or a doughnut, bot of which tasted like sawdust and she had trouble swallowing. She gave up coffee, thinking that it made her shake. And she thought constantly about Jack, Kelly, Karen and Angie. Even Lloyd seemed to be evading her. When she questioned him about it, he said that Olivia was ill, that there were too many kids over and Ellen's house, he was busy with his lodge and Ellen saw them as excuses to not see her. He probably didn't want to touch her again after what Kelly has done – she couldn't blame him.

One morning in early July, Ellen was thinking about Kelly on her way to work. She felt particularly bad this morning, jumpy and taunt. Suddenly the car ahead of her stopped and signaled for a turn, but Ellen with her thoughts miles away, drove the MG smack into the read of the other car. Glass shattered and metal screeched. The large car in front of Ellen was undamaged except for the mark on the bumper, but Ellen's MG had its headlights smashed and its front fender crumpled.

“Are you OK, Lady?”

“Yes, I'm OK, are you?”

“Well, I don’t know, I guess so. Why didn’t you stop” Didn’t you see me signal?”

“Look, I’m really sorry, but I guess I was thinking of something else. It is all my fault. Here is my insurance card and my driver’s license. Believe me, I really am sorry – it’s just that there has been so much on my mind lately and - “

“Well, you had better get your mind back onto driving or quit driving!”

Ellen went to a nearby house and using their phone, called her office, explained she would be late; called a tow truck and her mechanic. Going back to her car, Ellen looked at the damage. “Poor little car,” she thought, “I sure made a mess out of you.”

When the tow truck came, he hitched the little car and Ellen asked him to drop her off at home. There she picked up the Datsun and leaving a note for Karen and drove off to work. Late in the afternoon she received a call from the mechanic who told her he would work on the car over the weekend, but only if she would get \$600 down to him before five. It would have to be cash as he needed to get parts and he didn’t want to take a check. Ellen couldn’t understand why he had to have cash, but then she didn’t understand much lately, it seemed to her. She hurriedly left work, drove to the bank where she removed \$600 from her savings account. Her account with the bank was almost empty. Another worry. How was she going to manage? Leaving the bank, she decided to make a quick stop at home. Karen was at work and Angie was somewhere, who knew where. Quickly Ellen opened her closet, dug under a pile of sweaters and found the half empty bottle of Vodka. Her hand shook as she unscrewed the top and not bothering with a glass, she drank directly from the bottle. Gagging from the stoniness of the alcohol, Ellen sat down quickly. She swallowed several times, forcing the burning vodka to stay down. Then she took another swallow, then another. Her stomach calmed, but she felt slightly dizzy. “Too bad,” she thought, “that I can’t stay still for a bit, but I must hurry!”

She drove swiftly through the increasing traffic, pushing the Datsun faster and faster. Moving onto the expressway, she drove even faster. There she picked up more speed, keeping an eye on the mirror for a traffic cop. Up ahead was her exit. Time to turn off. The exit swerved forward to the highway beneath, the long swooping curve counterclockwise. As she entered the curve, Ellen realized suddenly that she was going too fast. The chain link fence was too close and with an all understanding though, Ellen saw that she was going to hit the fence, saw that this might be the end of her life, saw that this would be the end of all her problems. She thought, "I'm going to bit!" and let go of the wheel.

The car dove through the chain link fence, sailing off the banked turn as though it had wings, gliding down to the ground where it crashed into a small white picket fence and buried its nose under a mobile home.

There was blood dripping on her lap. Ellen saw the bright redness of it, saw the slow drip, drip splattering on her skirt. She looked up. Smoke was pouring from the engine. There were pieces of white painted wood driven in the seat on each side of her body. Dazed, she reached up and put her hand to her head, feeling the stickiness of her own blood. Slowly she reached up for the rear view mirror. There as a cut over her right eye, another on her nose. Her knee hurt. She looked out the window and there was men out there, with some sort of equipment, shaking the car. The door screeched open and hands move in on her, then lifted her out of the car and onto a waiting stretcher.

"My purse," she cried, "please let me have my purse!"

"Here it is, lady, now just relax."

Ellen was carried to a waiting ambulance which sped off to a nearby hospital. How strange it was to look up at the world – to see it flashing by, just sky, clouds and power poles, she mused.

At the hospital Ellen was quickly moved into an emergency room, then into an operating room where a doctor looked at her face.

“Nothing to serious,” he said, “but I want to take a few stitched around the eye and nose. She’s lucky that that one cut wasn’t closer to the eye. Another quarter of an inch and she might have lots her eye.” Then speaking to Ellen he said, “Don’t worry, Ellen, I am going to to a little plastic surgery on your face, just some small stitches. There shouldn’t be any scarring. Just try and relax.”

When the doctor left the room, finished with his work, Ellen reached down to the ice pack on her knee. She tore it open and grabbed some of the ice. She was so thirsty. The nurse tried to stop her, “You shouldn’t do that. That is not clean ice! You are in shock and shouldn’t eat or drink anything as you might vomit.”

“I don’t care,” said Ellen. “I just have to have something to drink.”

Two policemen came into the room. “We’d like to ask you a few questions, ma’am,” said one.

“Sure,” said Ellen.

“Can you tell us what happened?”

“No, all I can remember is that I thought I was going to crash.”

“Did you let go of the wheel? Did you brake at all?”

“Please, I just don’t remember!”

“OK, ma’am. Have you had anything to drink? I thought I could smell alcohol on your breath--”

“Oh, no officer,” Ellen firmly said.

“Well, we aren’t going to cite you, but the county will be in touch with you for the damages to the fence. Please drive more carefully in the future.”

A few minutes later Ellen was released from the hospital. She called Karen.

“Karen, I’ve had an accident and I need a ride home. Can you get someone to come and get me? I’m at Mercy Hospital.”

“You did what? You wrecked the Datsun? Lloyd called me and told me you have wrecked the MG this morning! How could you do such a thing, Mom? Just how could you! Well, I’m not

coming for you, you can just get home yourself. I don't want to ever see you again!" Karen screamed.

Hanging up the phone, shocked at Karen's reaction, Ellen fished in her purse for another dime. Finding the coin, she called a cab and was taken home. When the cab pulled up in front of her home, she got out and paid the drive. Alma came running out of her house across the street.

"Ellen, what in the world happened?" she cried.

Shakily Ellen related the day's happenings to her neighbor. "You should have called me," Alma said. I would have come and gotten you! Well, you had better go in and lie down for a while. I'll come over and see you later."

"Thanks, Alma, you're really sweet," said Ellen.

When Ellen got into the kitchen she was met by Karen who had a pillow in her hand. Ellen's face was half covered with bandage but Karen's rage was so great that she struck her mother repeatedly with the pillow, yelling, "You wrecked my car, you drunk! You are nothing but a stinking drunk!"

Chapter IX

The next day was Saturday and for a hot day in July, the atmosphere in the house was decidedly chilly. Karen not only refused to talk to her mother, but refused to be in the same room with her. Ellen was deeply hurt by Karen's reaction. She hadn't been drunk when the car crashed, she had only had a couple of drinks to steady her nerves. She felt that Karen was selfish and merely angry because her car was wrecked. Karen was furious with her mother as she felt that her mother had been overreacting to the problems. She saw her as someone she couldn't rely on, someone that she, Karen, now had to take of. It wasn't fair. Angie decided she didn't want any part of this fight and went her merry way, hoping it would all blow over and they would be back to normal soon.

Ellen check with the police station and located the Datsun. It was across town in a wrecking yard. She could pick it up anytime, but it was totaled. Ellen refused to believe that her car was totaled. As she remembered it, just the top of the car had been damaged where the engine was. Maybe it was just the radiator. She wouldn't believe it until she saw the car again. She called for a tow truck, explaining what she needed and was told that a truck would be at her house at six that evening. She passed most of the time in the afternoon playing solitaire sitting at the kitchen table. Her face was very sore, but no unbearable. She felt tense and tight, but then there was quite a strain in the house. Karen and Angie left the house at four with Steve and Dave. Ellen sat at the table flipping the cards over and over, gathering them up, shuffling, dealing, flipping.

Shortly after size the tow truck showed up and Ellen climbed up to the high seat. Introduced herself and they drove off. They hadn't gone more than a few blocks when a call came over the radio.

"Hey, Joe! Got a guy stuck in a ditch up off old Miner's Road. Can you go and let your your other job wait for a while?"

“It’s okay with me, Joe,” said Ellen, “but can I go with you?”

“sure, if you like,” replied Joe.

Joe turned the truck around and headed for the foothills. Almost an hour later they arrived at the site where a car was nose down in a ditch by the side of the road. Ellen was fascinated at watching Joe maneuver his rig, attached the chains, then slowly pulling the car out of the ditch.

They were back on the road again heading for Ellen’s car when another call came over the radio.

“Hey, Joe! We just got work on there that David Camero is and if you are able to, you can go in there and repossess it for us.”

Ellen rolled her head and Joe made a fast left then. It had grown dark and as they drew near an apartment complex, Joe turned off his lights. Carefully they glided in behind the apartments.

“There it is,” said Joe. “The boss is really going to be pleased. We have been looking for this baby for a long time!”

Silently Joe angled the truck into position, got out and hooked the two rigs up. Just as he was towing the Camero out of the parking lot, a man came running out, yelling and cursing.

“Sorry, Charlie.” laughed Joe.

Half an hour later, they finally arrived at the wrecking yard where Ellen’s car was. Poor thing, it really did look pretty bad. Joe shook his head, but he hooked it up and they took it back to Ellen’s house.

“Gee, Ellen, that’s really tough. You can probably sell it for parts. Why don’t you call Wyler’s. They’re pretty good outfit – probably give you a better price than most places.”

“Thanks, Joe. I really appreciate it. And say, tonight has been a lot of fun for me, thanks for letting me go along with you.”

“Hey, that’s okay. My pleasure! Say, would you like to go over to Pete’s for a beer?”

“Sure, let’s go!”

Pete's was a small bar just a short distance away from Ellen's home. Ellen was embarrassed to be seen publically with her bandage, but Joe took her arm and guided her to a stool at the bar. "Hi, Pete, this is Ellen," said Joe.

"Hi, Ellen, nice to meet you," said the bartender. "What will you have?"

"Do you have draft beer?" asked Ellen.

"Sure do, one draft coming up."

Ellen was amazed at the friendliness of the bar. People said hello, but didn't intrude unless asked if they would like to join the other group. An hour passed quickly. When Joe said he had better get her home, Ellen was sad, but nodded her head.

In her driveway, Ellen turned to Joe and said, "Joe, I know I have already written you a check for the work you did, but I really want to thank you for taking me along with you. It has been a truly wonderful evening. I was fascinated by what I saw – it was a lot of fun. And I have never realized that a bar could be so pleasant. I haven't been in a lot of bars, just once or twice with my husband, and I sort of got the idea they were dark and mysterious places, you know, something a woman didn't go into, but this was different – thanks a lot, Joe,"

"You're very welcome, Ellen, and good luck to you."

When Ellen got in the house, Karen switched on the light. She stood there, hands on hips, glaring at her mother. "And just where have you been, Mom?" I can smell beer on your breath. Who is that guy that brought you home? Do you know what time it is? Lloyd called but I told him I didn't know where you were or who you were out with. I see you brought the car home – now what are you doing to do with it?" Karen went on and on, but Ellen merely stood there looking at her daughter. How had the roles been reversed? This sounded like what she had wanted to ask Karen, not Karen ask her. Shaking her head, she turned and went to her bedroom. Karen followed, scolding her all the way. When Ellen refused to answer her, she finally turned and went into her own bedroom, slamming the door, as if to say, "There, I have a door to slam, not you who has been so bad!"

Ellen drank most of the next day, not bothering to eat, falling asleep at the kitchen table. She woke up at three in the morning, feeling stiff and went to bed, having another long drag at the vodka bottle. She got up at six, feeling nauseated. She tried to throw up but nothing came up. Desperate, she reached for the bottle. The smell made her gag. She slowly sipped, swallowed hard, tried to think of anything but her stomach and finally after a few more sips of vodka, the queasiness subsided. She had one more swallow, then brushed her teeth, took a quick shower and got dressed. Bill, Alma's husband was to drive her to work so she wanted to be ready when he was ready to leave.

A horn tooted and she dashed outside and got into Bill's car. She murmured good morning to him and tried to keep her head turned away, fearful that he would smell her breath, but he didn't appear to notice.

She had been at work for half an hour when the manager, Dick Early, called her into his office.

"Sit down, Ellen, I think we should have a talk."

"Of course," said Ellen, taking a chair as far away from him as she could.

"Ellen, I have become quite concerned about you, I know you have been having family problems and I am very sorry about that, but your work is slipping, slipping badly. You know that in this line of work we have to be alert at all times and very accurate. You have always been a top-notch employee, very loyal and hardworking. I know what the other say, that when my predecessor, Tom Roberts was ill, that you took over and handled everything. Did an excellent job, in fact, and it was of course a great sadness when he died. He is greatly missed. What I am saying is that the company know that you have been a very real asset to them and they are willing to look the other way, look the other way for quite a while, but now, well now – well, quite frankly Ellen, I suspect that you have been drinking. I can smell booze on you right now!"

"But, Mr. Early, I have been through so much! The beating that my daughter and I suffered, the trail and I will confess to

you that something else has happened to me – I – I was raped – and it has upset me horribly. I admit that I had a drink this morning, but I promise you that it will never happen again!”

“Well, Ellen, I can understand – and I am very sorry about all your troubles. I have taken a step and I want your complete cooperation otherwise we will have to let you go. I want you to check into a hospital for a stay, get well, you know, and then when you are feeling better you can come back. Your job will be waiting for you, don’t fear about that.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that, and I will do as you say.”

“Good, now I have called your daughter and she has made arrangements. I have asked Lloyd to drive you there. Now you be a good girl and we’ll see you soon. We really care about you, Ellen.”

Dick Early escorted Ellen to his door, opened it for her and motioned to Lloyd. Lloyd came over, took Ellen’s arm and guided her out the back door of the office.

“Don’t be scared, Ellen,” he said as he helped her into his car, “this is for your own good. You will get lots of rest and soon you will be well again. You know how much I care for you. I want my old Ellen back again. Please get well for me -”

Ellen watched the scenery slide by, thinking she was getting quite a chance lately of watching scenery slide by. At least this time she was upright instead of strapped in an ambulance.

In a few minutes they arrived at the hospital. Karen was waiting for them. As soon as Ellen got out of the car, Lloyd drive off and Karen took her mother’s arm and pulled her into the hospital.

“I’m going, Karen, you don’t have to pull,” said Ellen.

“Oh, Mom, I just want you to start feeling better.”

“Well, I don’t know what this is all about, but I promised Mr. Early I would give it a try. I just need to get some good rest and then I’ll be all right again.”

A smiling nurse put Ellen in a wheelchair, mentioning hospital rules when Ellen protested and Karen waved goodbye to her mother. Ellen was wheeled down the hall and through a

pair of double doors, then she was allowed to get out of the wheelchair and was led to what was to be her room.

“I want you to get undressed, put on the hospital robe and just climb into bed. The doctor will be by soon and will check you out.”

A few minutes later, Dr. Chambers, her family physician, came into the room. “Good morning, Ellen,” he said, “I think this will help you a lot. This is the Therapeutic Community wing of our hospital. I want you to stay a week, get your strength back, get some decent food into you and it will give you a chance to talk some of your problems over with some of our specialists. Karen is quite concerned about you, you know, and you should be proud that you have a daughter that is so caring. A lot of teenagers today would just look the other way when their mother was not feeling well. Now, I am going to give you a shot to relax you.”

A few hours later, Ellen woke up to find a nurse by her bed with a tray holding soup, crackers and fruit. She felt so thirsty so she eagerly drank the soup, but ignored the crackers as she knew they would just be sawdust in her mouth. Finishing the soup, she set the tray down and stood up. Looking around she noticed that she didn't have a door on her room. “Hm,” she said to herself, “just like home!” Peeking around the door, she saw a group of people reading, two playing chess and one person just walking up and down in front of a large glass window overlooking a garden – a garden with very high walls.

“Hi, there,” came a voice from around the corner, “what are you here for?”

Ellen looked and saw a petite blonde woman smiling at her. The woman had on too much makeup and Ellen thought she looked anything but attractive. “Oh, I'm just here for a rest,” she replied.

“Me, too, honey, well, see you around,” she giggled.

Puzzled, Ellen retreated into her room, climbed back into the bed and leafed through a magazine. The nurse came back in, gave her another shot and Ellen drifted off to sleep again.

“Help, help, help,” screamed a woman, “God, help me, help me, help me!”

Ellen was awakened by the voice. The footsteps running, more voices. “Get her Mike, she’s going around your way!”

More screams, then quiet and footsteps coming near. A nurse stopped by her door and flashed a light on her. Ellen jumped and clutched the covers to her breast. “Don’t fret, Ellen, I’m just doing a bed check,” said the nurse.

“What was all that noise?” asked Ellen.

“Oh, nothing much, don’t worry about it. We just had a little trouble with Rosie. She likes to yell at night sometimes.”

Then Ellen realized just where she was. She was locked up with a bunch of nuts, crazy people – and she wanted out!

Chapter X

The week passed slowly for Ellen. Each day she was asked to join a group for therapy and each day she refused. She even refused to use the craft room. Ellen was very adept at crafts, but she would not set foot into the room. She passed the days off by herself, as though by association with the others, some of their craziness would rub off on her. She read, sat in the garden with the high walls and laid on her bed looking at the tops of the buildings creeping into the sky. She never thought about her problems, but put them completely out of her mind, as if by not thinking about them, they would disappear. Nights were bad as each night was a repeat of the first. Rosie or some other inmate would start screaming – there would be the running noises up and down the hall – and Ellen stayed in her bed and pretended that she was asleep. She ate more and grew calmer. One day, the plastic surgeon who had worked on her face the day of the accident, had her brought to a room and he removed the stitches in her face. Her face had healed except for a few bruises and a slight tilt to one eye. Ellen didn't even care about her appearance. She remained numb and waiting.

At last the week was over and Ellen was released. Karen picked her up in the MG and took her home. Ellen didn't even care that the MG was fixed. Karen followed her mother into the house, watched her while she washed her hands, cleaned up the kitchen sink and started preparing dinner. Karen peeled potatoes and set the table. When the meal was ready they ate together in silence. Angie was not home but no one mentioned where she was or what she was doing. Daffy quacked in the bedroom and Mouse dozed on a nearby chair. After the dinner dishes were cleared away, Ellen went back to her bedroom. There she stripped the bed of the dirty sheet, put fresh ones on and straightened up her room -putting away her jewelry which the girls had taken out, putting away her makeup and her clothes; and removing the empty bottles of wine and vodka hidden in the

closet and under the bed. She walked through the house, Karen's eyes on her, and threw the empty bottle in the garbage can.

As she came back into the house, Ellen said, "Karen, you can stop worrying about me. I am not going to drink anymore."

"I'm so glad, Mom, so glad you have decided to quit," replied Karen.

Ellen looked calmly at her daughter who was sitting at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette, then she turned and went back to her room and went to bed.

The next day at work, Ellen ignored the curious stares. She stayed quiet, calmly doing her work. At lunch she drove off by herself to a nearby park and ate her lunch. After lunch she returned to her desk, working quickly through the afternoon and leaving promptly at five leaving Lloyd watching her in the parking lot.

The days followed in the same pattern. Ellen dutifully did her work, kept to herself and came home each night where she cleaned up the mess the girls had left in the kitchen and the bathroom. She did not complain to the girls, merely picked up things and set the house right each day. She did not drink and her skin took on a clearer, fresher tone and she put on a few pounds, filling out the hollow in her body.

Two weeks after her stay in the hospital, Ellen bought another car, putting a small amount down and arranging for monthly payments. The car was a blue MGB, a later model than her other MG – sort of like a younger sister. Ellen felt as though she had a family out in the garage with the two MG's side by side. Karen was thrilled to pieces about the new car and kept it washed and vacuumed. Ellen looked the other way when she heard the car squeal to a stop in the driveway or burn rubber leaving the house.

At work, Lloyd left on vacation with Olivia and the kids. He caught Ellen aside the last day before he left and told her he would write to her just as often as he could. He told her how proud he was of her and her new health. Ellen let him kiss her

goodbye and watched him drive off, strangely not feeling anything.

Two more weeks passed and Ellen's routine continued. She went to work and came home, went to work and came home. Karen and Angie flitted in and out, always busy with their lives. Karen grew quite thin and pulled and pinned her uniform to fit. She always seemed to be on the go, not sleeping much whereas Angie collapsed and was socked out for as long as twelve hours in her room. Karen took to twisting a strand of her long blonde hair on one finger, twisting until her finger was locked in the strand and she had to work to free it. Steve, her boyfriend, often spent the night with her, and gradually, he too settled into the house, spending more time with Karen than he did at his own home.

Ellen ignored everyone, seemingly not caring about what was going on. It was a Friday in August that she idly checked the mail at home, she realized that Lloyd was due to be back from vacation soon and she hadn't received a letter or a card from him. "Well, so much for his promises," she thought.

When she got to the kitchen she saw it was a total mess. Angie or someone had made cookies and there was flour, cookie dough and even spilled milk on the floor. The oven was still on and the water in the sink was running. Going back towards her bedroom, she passed the girl's bathroom. It stunk. There were wet towels everywhere, puddle of water on the floor and duck manure in the tub. Angrily Ellen slammed the door of the bathroom, then she returned to the kitchen and went out the back door, slamming it too. Suddenly she was furious. "The hell with it," she thought, "the hell with it all!"

Ellen drove over to the nearby shopping center, parked the car and wandered around, looking into the windows, trying to fight her anger. Gradually she calmed down and was about to return to her car and go home when she passed a little beer tavern. It was just a hole in the wall, looking dark and cool inside. The door was open and Ellen could see a long bar, a pool table to one side and a juke box with tables in the rear. It looked

cool and comforting. She could hear soft murmuring voices and an old tune playing. She held her breath and walked in, trying to adjust her eyes in the darkness, and seeing a vacant spot at the end of the bar, she sat down. "I'll just have a coke," she thought, "it is so pleasant and cool in here."

"What will you have, lady?" asked the bartender.

Without even thinking any further, in spite of having just told herself she would have a coke, Ellen replied, "I'll have a dark draft, please."

"Coming right up."

Ellen sat there in the cool, quiet darkness, and watched the hot people scurrying around outside through the open door. She sipped her beer slowly. It had to be the best tasting beer she had ever had. She looked around. There were a few men sitting near the front of the bar. They shook dice and talked quietly together, glancing at her once or twice, but leaving her alone. When she had finished her beer, she paid and left, feeling refreshed and calm again. She drove home and parked the car in the garage, but before getting out, put a stick of gum in her mouth.

"There was nothing wrong with what I did," thought Ellen. "I just had a beer and I'm not going to have anymore, but I don't need to let Karen know I did it either!"

Going into the house, she started working on the kitchen and when she had finished there, she attacked the bathroom and cleaned it thoroughly,

Ellen was sound asleep in her bed when the girls came home. From the sounds of it, there must have been at least ten kids with then as the stereo was turned on full blast and Ellen could here glasses and dishes rattling in the kitchen. Voices called back and forth to each other. Ellen pulled the pillow over her head and concentrated on not thinking, her fists clenching at the pillow.

The next morning she got up to find one boy asleep on the sofa, a boy and a girl wrapped around each other (and sound asleep) on the rug and another boy asleep at the kitchen table. There were potato chips crunched into the carpet, coke and beer

cans scattered everywhere and ashtray overflowing and a “roach clip” in the kitchen table. Ellen couldn’t help but think she had had Kelly thrown out of her home for smoking pot and here it was again – right out in the open on her kitchen table.

Ellen cleaned up the kitchen. The boy slept on, mumbling in his dreams. Ellen realized that she didn’t know any of these kids in her house. Where in the world had Karen and Angie picked up these kids? Didn’t they have homes to go to?

After she finished the kitchen, she put on her gloves and went out and pulled weeds for a while. She had always found comfort in pulling weeds as she could destroy the weeds where she wasn’t allowed to attack people or things, at least she could wreck havoc on weeds.

Around non the house began to wake up and the strange kids left. Karen dashed around and hurriedly left for work in the new car. Angie slept on.

Late in the afternoon, Ellen showered and changed to a dress, and drove back to the shopping center and slipped into the bar. She sat again at the end and had a beer, slowly sipping it and watching the people outside running about with their busy lives. After she finished the on beer, she again left and returned home, again chewing a piece of gum before entering the house.

Angie was out on the deck, sunbathing, cigarette nearby smoldering. Out on the lawn with a string tied to his leg was Daffy, busily pecking at the grass and quacking excitedly. Mouse sat a way off, watching, tail quivering.

“Hi, Mom,” called Angie, “Boy, did we have a blast last night! I met the coolest dude! I am just crazy about him!”

“Hi, Angie, you had better watch Daffy – Mouse is already watching him!”

“Don’t worry, Mom, Daffy is OK. He is pretty big now and I don’t think Mouse will get him. He can probably take care of himself pretty good now.”

Indeed the little yellow duck had more than tripled its size and now had brown feather in his wings and tail. Little patches of yellow down clung to various parts of his growing body.

“OK, Angie,” said Ellen, “maybe you’re right,” and she turned and went into the house, Mouse following her..

That evening was a repeat of the night before. Ellen hoped the neighbors would complain, but they didn’t. She laid in her bed and concentrated on not thinking and finally fell into a restless sleep.

Ellen didn’t go to the bar that night. She stayed home and did her laundry, ironed hers and the girls clothes and leafed through the magazine that had come the day before. The women’s magazines seemed boring. The articles were all about cooking a company dinner or getting along with your husband or how to talk to your child’s teacher. They seemed dull and not related to Ellen’s life at all.

The following day at work, Lloyd was back at work. He cornered Ellen behind the filing cabinet and whispered, “Sorry I didn’t write. Olivia didn’t give me a chance to be alone once. Can I come over and see you tonight? I’ve missed you terribly!”

“Sorry, not tonight. The girls are having company in,” replied Ellen. “Well,” she thought, “they always do, so I’m not really lying.” She realized that she was making an excuse but she didn’t want to be with Lloyd. She wanted to be left alone. She didn’t want to deal with her relationship with him and she couldn’t tell him that she was angry for his not writing because she didn’t feel a thing. She just didn’t want to be bothered.

Lloyd looked puzzled, but murmured that they would have to get together soon. Ellen nodded her head and went back to work.

After work, she drove home, but as she drew near her home, she saw that there were two cars parked in the driveway and even three houses away she could hear the noise from the stereo. She turned the car around and drove over to the shopping center. As she walked into the bar and moved to her seat at the end, the bartender, “Well, here is the Blue Lady.”

Ellen looked down at her dress and realized that she was indeed wearing blue, but she didn’t know if he called her that because of her dress or because of her mood.

Chapter XI

Karen was tired. She was nearing the end of her shift and she was sick of the smell of hamburgers and french fries. She especially hoped she would never have to peel another onion. It has been her job first thing this morning to peel and slice a hundred pounds of onions. Yuck! She slipped into the rest room and reaching into her pocket, quickly swallowed the little white pill. There, she would feel better in a few minutes. She guessed she was taking too many of them lately, but it helped to get through the day – especially when she was tied from the night before. Karen couldn't understand why kids took downers or smoked pot. Pot made her throat hurt and she felt weird. She and Laurie had taken LSD once on a dare and it had scared her to pieces. Never again. Laurie had thought it was fun. Karen liked speed better. She felt all jazzed up and she could do most anything. Of course she had lot a little weight, but then she thought she looked better thinner. She hoped her cheeks got those little hollows in them like Mom's. That looked really sharp. Steve had gotten her into speed – said it would help her impress her boss how hard she could work. Well it had, and now her boss expected her to run double time all day long. Some things just never work out the way you plan.

Still, Mom was better. That little trip to the “special” ward in the hospital had really straightened her out. Karen was glad she had done it. She was glad that Mom understood that she couldn't behave the way she did. Well, had better get back into the old grind – boss might get suspicious and come looking for her.

Karen was just getting in her car to go home when Kelly drove up in his Nova. She opened the passenger side for his to get in.

“Hi,” said Kelly, “what's going on?”

“Nothing much, what's with you?”

“Same old shit, nothing much. Say, Karen, I just kinds wondered about Mom – like how’s she been and all – you know, I just wondered what was going on.”

“Oh, she’s a lot better since she’s been out of the hospital. She even quit drinking. I saw her throw out all her old bottle and I haven’t found any more. She looks lots better too.”

“Do you think she might let me come back home? I mean, the old man can be a drag, you know. Mom cooks a lot better – and well, every time I go by the house there seems to be lots of action going on. Why don’t you talk to her and see if she’s mellowed out and will let me move back in?”

“Sure, I’ll ask her – except Angie is in your own room – you’d have to set up a cot or something up in the sewing room or something.”

“Shit, I’d even sleep on the floor if I could come back, so ask her, Karen, like real soon, OK?”

“Sure, Kelly, I’ll see what I can do. Well gotta go – have to go home and shower and change. Steve and I are going to the drag races tonight. Should be a blast. See you.”

Kelly watched his sister drive away in the flashy blue MG. Karen sure got all the breaks. He should have played it a little cooler around Mom they he could have had a car too – a real car instead of this old junker he had to drive now. Things had sure changed around the old home lately. When he was there Mom had been all over him, don’t do this, don’t do that. He didn’t pay any attention to her when she ragged at him about smoking pot. So what if he sold a little – just enough to make some change, that’s all. But no, she had gotten really pissed and had him busted, then refused to let him back home – made him go live with the old man up in the hills. Well, he had gotten even. Kelly remembered how glad he had been to find out that Jack was back in town. It had been so easy to feed him some downers, a little rum and beer and the guy was crazy as a coot. Then all he had to do was suggest that Mom had turned Karen against him and Jack was running for the door.

Kelly hadn't meant to make out with Mom, it had just sort of happened, well, yeah, he had kind of thought of that too. Vinnie had given him the idea. Vinnie said he knew a guy that did it with his mother all the time – said he didn't have to worry about his mother getting pregnant. When Kelly had seen Mom lying there drunk, he thought, why not? Teach the old broad a lesson. Well, it must have because she had really mellowed out – letting all those kids over for all those parties. Besides, she was pretty drunk that night. She probably didn't even remember it. He had had a hard time coming and he never ever did before. Shit, he hoped Mom was really drunk that night. It might spoil his chance of coming back home if she remembered it. Well, no use worrying about it. Better let Karen lay the groundwork and see what happened.

Kelly drove home and found the six back he stashed under the house. Taking it into his room and shutting the door, he quietly got drunk.

When Warren got home that night after a late meeting, he was pleased to find Kelly was home and apparently sound asleep. He felt that Kelly had been pretty wild lately and it eased his mind to see his son safely home in bed.

Chapter 12

Ellen stopped by the little tavern every night after work. She no longer even went home first. What was the point in going home and getting angry she would surmise and thus went directly to the bar, ordered her draft beer and sat in her spot at the end of the bar. Gradually she found that she never had to buy more than the first beer. Someone else always bought the next one and the next one.

August drifter by, long and hot smoldering day, but the nights were cool and restful those few hours in the bar. Going home after a few beers became harder and harder for Ellen. She hated to leave the pleasant companions for the house full of restless teenagers. The house was always hot and noisy, full of problems while the bar was quiet and cool. She didn't have to talk to anyone if she didn't want to and no one expected her to clean up a mess or cook dinner.

Ellen stayed later and later in the bar. If she stayed late enough there might not be anyone in the house when she went home and she could crawl into bed and immediately sink into a blissful dreamless sleep. She ate only when she had to and the hunger pangs were not frequent so she grew thinner.

One night, Mac, who was a regular at the bar, invited her out for a hamburger and fries. They left the bar together and walked to the nearby McDonalds where Mac purchased the burgers and they took food to the nearby park to eat. They sat in the cool quiet of the deserted park and Mac told Ellen about his work as an electrician, his wife was always too busy for him, and the kids who seemed too young and noisy for him to get interested in. Ellen told him she had a few problems but didn't elaborate. She was hesitant to even think about what troubled her. She was grateful for the food and the companionship and when Mac suggested they go to a nearby motel, she accepted. Mac stopped at a convenience store and bought a six pack of beer, but when they pulled up to the hotel, Ellen suddenly felt shy.

“I’m sorry, Mac,” she said. “Maybe I should go home – nothing against you, I like you, but I don’t think I am ready for this. Please don’t think badly of me, I didn’t mean to lead you on or anything, but I really feel I should go home.”

“Sure,” said Mac, “no problem, we’ll make it some another time. I don’t want to push you into anything. You just look so sweet and sad, that I thought it might cheer you up to have someone hold you and love you.”

“I think you might be right,” replied Ellen, “but-” and she touched his arm, then lightly kissed him on the lips.

Mac returned Ellen to her car and she drove home, wondering why she had not gone with Mac. When she reached home, she was sorry that she had not stayed out longer because Karen met her at the door. Karen was very angry.

“Just where have you been, Mom?” she yelled. “Are you up to your old tricks again? And after what you promised! DO you want to go back to the hospital? I can smell the beer on your breath – you are very late getting home-” Karen raved on and on, following her mother through the house.

“For God’s sake, Karen, will you leave me alone!” Ellen finally yelled back.

“No, I won’t leave you alone! I can’t trust you! You are supposed to be home and cooking dinner and you are out wandering around like a slut – what kind of mother are you, anyway?”

“I’m the mother who is sick and tired of the mess I come home to each night. Sick and tired of all the noise and confusion that goes on while I am trying to sleep! And I want my door put back on my bedroom – right now - “

“You’re drunk, Mom, and if you think I will lift a finger to help you, you’re dead wrong!” and with that Karen stormed off to her room, slamming her door.

Ellen sighed. Then she picked up her purse and keys and went back to the car. If she was going to be called a drunk, she might as well be one and she headed for the nearest 7-11 store and bought a bottle of sherry and a bottle of vanilla. She stuffed

the vanilla in her purse and hid the sherry under the seat of the car.

When she got home, the house was dark. She let herself in quietly and walked back to her bedroom. Karen's door was still shut. She undressed, showered and slipped into bed where she laid there and watched the clock for an hour. Then, she stole down the hall, pausing at Karen's door. Slowly she eased the doorknob to the right and opened it. Moonlight spilled onto Karen's bed, revealing it to be empty of Karen or anyone else. Looking around, Ellen couldn't find Karen's purse. "Oh, well, someone must have come by and she went out," she thought. Then boldly she went out to the car and brought the wine bottle into the house. Going to the cupboard, she removed four empty jam jars from the storage area and filled them with the wine. Then she took the empty bottle and going into the year, stealthily slid it under the foliage of a clump of day lilies. Back into the kitchen where she picked up the now full jam jars and took them back to the bedroom where she hid one behind the clock radio, one in the bookshelf, one in her pile of sweaters and one in the shower which looked as though it was a bottle of shampoo.

She undressed, slipped into bed and then reaching back behind her picked up the jam jar from behind the radio and opening it, she slowly sipped from the jar.

The next morning Ellen had a hangover. "It must be from combining beer and wine," she thought and resolved to be more careful about what she drank. She took a valium and managed to get through the day.

That evening she again sat in the bar. Mac didn't show up and Ellen felt sad about that. She would have liked to talk to him again. She stayed in the bar until after ten, finally leaving with sadness, dreading the possible scene at home.

Just as expected, Karen met her at the door. Standing with her hands on her hips, she glared at her mother. Then, moving from the kitchen out into the garage, she grabbed the keys out of

her mother's hand. "There!" she said, "now you won't be going out again tonight, mother dear!"

"Karen! Give me back my keys!"

"Forget it, Mom, and if you like it so much away from here, why don't you just stay away – in fact don't come back at all!" And with that, she slammed the back door shut and locked it.

Ellen was furious. She couldn't remember when she had been so angry. How dare Karen lock her out of her very own home! She banged on the door with her fists and yelled, "Karen, open this door this instant! This is my house – open the door!"

Karen ignored her mother. Ellen could hear her footsteps going through the house, then the stereo turned up high. Ellen ran around the house, rushing to check the patio door. It was locked too. Every window was locked. Running back to the garage, her face flaming with anger, Ellen grabbed the step stool by the washing machine and a hammer. She ran back to her bedroom window and standing on the stool, she smashed the window with the hammer. Glass flew everywhere. She broke out the small pieces and climbed into her bedroom. Karen was standing in her doorless doorway, then she turned and ran into her own room, slamming the door.

"I'll break every window in this goddamn house if I have to," screamed Ellen at her daughter, "because you will not lock me out of my own house!"

She stripped off her clothes and ran her shower. Once in the shower, she opened the jar of sherry and drank it all in fast gulps. Once she got out of the shower, she slipped on her nightgown and removing the jar from under her sweaters, she drank it down too.

Sweating profusely, she sank down on her bed and curling up in a fetal position, she fell asleep. Shortly after two in the morning, she groggily tried to wake up. She had to urinate. She tried to get to her feet, but one foot was caught in the sheet and she struggled to free it, she fell from the bed, landing on the floor with a thud. She couldn't hold the urine and she wet herself and the small throw rug. "Shit," she thought, "all that

beer!” She threw a towel on the wet spot and told herself she would clean it up in the morning. This night had just been too much for her. She sank back down on the bed only to be awakened a few minutes later by a cold wet nose. It was Mouse. The cat had found the open bedroom window and was now laying on her bed. Ellen felt as though Mouse was checking to see if she was okay. She reached out and touched the cat’s soft fur. “Good old Mouse, you still love me, don’t you?” Mouse purred her answer.

The next morning Ellen felt terrible. She was so thirsty. She staggered to the kitchen hoping to find a coke. There she was met by Karen. “My God,” thought Ellen, “every time I see Karen lately she is glaring at me and has her hands on her hips!”

“Well, Mom, how do you feel this morning? Kind of rough? Well, I’m going to make sure you stay home all weekend. I have your car keys and I am going to keep them! Let’s see how far you can get when you have to walk to wherever it is you go!”

Ellen found a coke, drank it, burped defiantly at her daughter and went back to her room. An hour later she heard Karen get in to the car and drive away. Quickly she changed into brown pants and blue tee shirt. Then she climbed out her bedroom window, moved over the back fence where she hoisted herself up and over the fence, dropping down on the other side in the orchard. She looked around and seeing no one, she tried to walk calmly through the trees to the street. Once she reached the street, she walked three blocks to the little Mom and Pop grocery store and purchased a bottle of wine. Back down the street, through the orchard, over the fence and breathing heavily from the exertion she climbed back into her bedroom through the same procedure as before, emptying the wine into small jars and hiding them, throwing the empty bottle in the bushes. She went back and laid down again and slept.

When Ellen woke, it was almost six in the morning. The house was quiet so she tiptoed through, checking it out. No one around. She fed Mouse, then went back and took a shower, changed her cloths and using the same procedure, left the house

– out the bedroom window, over the fence, through the orchard and down the street, walk four blocks to the tavern, through the door and at last, safe in her seat at the end of the bar.

“Hi, there, Blue Lady! The usual?”

“Right you are!”

Mac didn’t come in that evening, but Dick did. He was another of the regulars and he came over and sat by Ellen, buying her one beer after another. It was about nine when he made the suggestion. “Say, how about you coming over to my place – I’ll cook us a couple of steaks?”

“Sure, why not,” replied Ellen, thinking to herself that she really should eat something, and she slid off the bar stool and followed Dick out to his car.

Dick lived in a hotel, renting a room by the month. He took Ellen up the stairs and showed her the place, told her to make herself comfortable and he would be right back – had to go to the store for a few things.

Ellen got bored waiting for Dick. She felt thirsty too. There wasn’t anything around to drink, not even a coke. She opened the door and wandered into the hallway. It was too hot and stuffy in the hotel room. She wanted some fresh air and she wanted another drink. As she moved down the hallway, she met two men and a woman, in their 20’s probably, long hair on both men tied back with rubber bands. The woman had her long hair braided in two braids, swinging free.

“Hi, Lady,” said one of the men. “Will you join our party? We would like to buy you a drink.”

“Sure,” said Ellen, and followed the strangers down the hall to another room. They took her into a room and with all of them sitting on the floor, they pulled out a bottle of whiskey and some glasses and poured for everyone.

“What a nice bunch of people,” thought Ellen. “Here they don’t even know me and they asked me in for a drink.”

An hour or so must have passed and Ellen began to feel very sleepy. She rose and said, “Thanks a lot for the drink, but I had better get home.”

“Hey, Lady, we’ll take you home. Hank will take you. Can’t have a lady walking the street this time of night. Can you ride on the back of a bike?”

“Sure,” said Ellen, “I can do anything!”

Idly she wondered what had happened to Dick, but she followed the young man out to the street and when he had his motorcycle revved up, she hopped on the back, grabbing him around the waist and they took off down the street in a blaze of noise.

“Just tell me where, Lady!”

“OK, just keep going, it’s kind of hard to see in the dark, but I think you go down this street-”

Ellen was getting confused. Nothing looked very familiar. She didn’t want to go home by the street as Karen would be sure to see her and then she would be in trouble again. She wanted to find the orchard and go back through it and over the fence to her own yard. Finally she saw an open field. She pulled on his arm, “Let me off here,” she said, “it is just a little ways from here and I want to walk the rest of the way.”

“OK, Lady, if you say so,” and he stopped the bike and Ellen slipped off the back.

“Thanks,” she called over the noise of the motor, “Thanks for everything.”

Ellen watched the cycle move off in the darkness. Everything looked so strange, but she was sure the house was just over that way. She moved across the field, stumbling over a rock and falling to her knees. She came to a rise and started down the other side. Her foot caught in a gopher hole and she fell again, landing in some scratchy bushes. She tore through the bushes and moved in the direction she thought her house was in. “Odd that it was so dark, It must be really late and everyone has their lights off. But where are the street lights?” she thought. Confused, she turned around. “No, it had to be that way.” She moved forward again, falling twice more and skinning her knee, tearing her pants in the process. There was a dark shape ahead. It was an old shed. Then another one, a barn of sorts, and finally

a house. At last a street and at the end, a street light. Ellen couldn't figure out where she was. She wandered down the street, turned the corner, walked down another street. All the homes were dark. A dog barked. Ellen walked on. Finally up ahead she saw some lights and moved towards them. It appeared to be just another house, but once she got near, she saw that it was a fire station. "Help at last," she thought, "at least now I can find out where I am."

The fireman looked up in surprise at the sight of a woman walking into the station. She was covered with dirt, her pants were torn and she had scratches and bruises all over her arm and face. There was a swelling by one eye.

"Can I help you, Ma'am?" he asked, noting the smell of booze on her as she drew near.

"You look as though you have had some trouble. Can I call anyone for you? Did your husband beat you? Why are you walking around this time of night?"

"Well, Ellen lied, "we had a few words – and I got mad and walked out. Guess I walked too far and got lost. If you can just show me on a map where I am, then I can walk home and by the time I get back he will have cooled off. I'll apologize, because it really was my fault," her voice trailed off.

"OK, Lady, if you're sure you will be all right." Moving over to a large map on the wall, he showed Ellen the location of the fire station.

Ellen could hardly believe her eyes. She was miles from home. Well, it wouldn't do any good to call Karen. She knew what her answer would be, so she thanked the fireman, and walked out the door, setting out for home.

By the time she drew near her street, it was nearly daylight. She walked through the orchard, wearily climbed over the fence, tearing her pants again in the process. The house appeared silent. She climbed in the bedroom window. All quiet. As she moved by the mirror her mouth fell open in shock at what she saw. Her hair was full of weeds. She was covered from head to foot with dirt and every inch of exposed skin was scratched. Her

right eye was turning black. And she itched. She went in and took a long hot shower, then with the house still silent, she found one of her hidden jars and a long drink, at last falling into her own bed. She was asleep in seconds.

When Ellen awoke, it was noon and she itched terribly. She scratched, then looked at what she was scratching and groaned. She was covered in blisters. She had poison oak and while she had had cases of it before, this was a dilly. She found her purse, took out the bottle of vanilla she had carried with her all night and drank half of it. Then she brushed her teeth and went out to the kitchen. Karen was at the sink washing the dishes. Turning around to see her mother she cried out, “Mom, what is wrong with you? You look awful!”

“It’s just a case of poison oak, but it is pretty bad and I think I should probably go see Dr. Chambers and get something for it.”

“Sure, Mom, I’ll drive you,” replied Karen. She helped her mother dress, then drove her to the emergency room of the hospital; Ellen drew back in fear when she saw where they were going. “Relax, Mom, it is Sunday. We have to go to the hospital. They will call Dr. Chambers and he will see you here.”

A half hour later, Dr. Chambers arrived and examined Ellen. “Well, Ellen you have a server case of poison oak. Thought you knew enough to stay away from the stuff. I would like to admit you to the hospital for a few days so we can treat it, give you something strong to relieve the itching.”

Ellen nodded her head in agreement. Taking Karen aside, Dr. Chambers said, “Well, we can dry her out again. I think you will have to face the fact, Karen, that your mother is an alcoholic. This type of behavior may go on for years. You are a brave girl to put up with her. I’ll admit her and treat her for poison oak. Give her lots of sedative and get some food into her. She’ll be fine in a few days.”

Ellen soon found herself in a hospital bed, covered with ointment, shot full of tranquilizers and each arm tied down with

gauze strips. Preventing Ellen from scratching herself and from leaving the hospital.

Chapter 13

Ellen went underground on her drinking. She didn't want to stop drinking, but she didn't want Karen to know about it, so she had little jars of vodka around the house. She carried a quart in the tool chest of the old MG and she had a pint hidden behind the clock radio over her bed. She even had one hidden in the heater vent in the floor of her bedroom. This last one was a little bit noisy to get at as she had to remove the vent and slide the bottle along the metal tubing to remove it, so she saved this one for when there wasn't anyone in the house. The empty bottles she stashed in the bushes in the back yard and when the bushes were full, she took numerous trips to public trash containers to dispose of her empties. She found that she could get a lot of empties into one grocery sack by breaking the bottles, thereby reducing their size. She carried breath mints, brushed her teeth constantly, gargled twice a day and used perfume liberally. She drank mainly vodka, believing that no one could smell it on her. She knew she was drinking too much, but when she heard others brag about their drinking bouts, she believed that she wasn't drinking as much as they were. More and more she had to drink in the morning, fighting each time to keep the alcohol in her stomach until it got into her bloodstream and calmed her shaking nerves. She had trouble getting through the day without her boost of booze and finally had to resort to a quick drink at noon, chewing gum for an hour afterward, trying not to belch and bring up the odor of raw alcohol in her stomach. She stayed away from the beer tavern believing that beer would smell on her breath and Karen would notice it and she would be back in another hospital.

Karen thought her mother was better. At least she was home every night on time or at least was home when Karen got home from work. It was true that she was often asleep either on the couch or in bed, but she didn't notice anything unusual about her. Angie was hardly ever home. She had found a group of friends on cycles and she buzzed here and there with them,

being up all night and sleeping all day. She grew careless with Daffy and one day left him out in the back yard. When she tried to find him hours later, he was nowhere in sight. Ellen helped her look for him, but the duck was gone. Angie blamed Mouse for scaring him away and believed that she would find him just in the next yard, but Ellen the next day after Daffy's disappearance, found a webbed foot and knew Daffy was gone for good.

Karen was finding it hard to work, go to school and paraty every night. Gradually she cut enough school that she dropped out and calmly intercepted the mail addressed to her mother from the school, burning it in the fireplace. Karen took more and more of the little white pills until she took ten each morning to get going, gulping more during the day and more in the evening to stay awake.

When Ellen found hypodermic needles in Karen's room, she asked Karen what they were for. She knew that Karen would not use a needle as she was terrified of them, having had multiple penicillin shots as a child. Ellen remembered Karen's screams of terror at seeing a needle and knew her child was not using them. Karen replied to her mother's question that Steve was using them, that he was diabetic and Ellen accepted her answer. Karen breathed a sigh of relief and warning Steve to be more careful. She knew that Steve was an addict, but he was such a good guy and never beat her, that she loved him anyway. Besides Steve didn't get weird when he used, so there was nothing wrong with what he was doing.

It was late on a Friday night towards the end of September when Karen and Steve drove into the garage. Karen noticed that her Mom's car was in the garage and she breathed a quiet sigh of relief. But her relief disappeared as she and Steve entered the kitchen and found Ellen curled up in a ball in the corner of the kitchen. She appeared asleep.

"Mom! Mom!" yelled Karen. "Wake up, Mom! Steve, she won't wake up!"

“Don’t fret, girl, she’s still breathing. I think she has passed out. Look, she has even peed on the floor.”

“Oh, my God, Steve, what am I going to do?”

“Shit, Karen, you’ve tried so much – why don’t you take her to Detox” They will know how to handle her. Come on, help me pick her up and we’ll put her in the car.”

Ellen mumbled something, then cried out, “No, don’t!”, then slipped back into her stupor.

Detox was across town, but by the freeway late at night the trip took only 20 minutes. Ellen slept on, her breathing ragged and uneven.

“Steve, I think she’s dying . . . Something she seems like she isn’t going to breathe anymore . . . I’m really scared!”

“Relax – she’s just drunk. Detox will take care of her . . . they’re used to it!”

After Steve had parked the car, he and Karen urged Ellen to her feet and half carried her to the admittance room. They plunked her down in a chair where she immediately put her head down on the table and went back to sleep. Karen gave the orderly her mother’s name, age, and address. Her took Ellen’s blood pressure, pulse and quickly taped a band on her wrist. He moved her to a wheelchair then turned to Karen and said, “You can come back for her in the morning if you like, or you can let her stay a couple of days.”

“Let her stay,” replied Karen.

“Well, maybe she will get lost,” said Karen sarcastically, turning away.

The orderly looked unconcerned, just turned and wheeled Ellen through the swinging doors and down the hall into a room, then undressed her and putting her in a hospital gown, put her into bed.

When Ellen opened her eyes, she saw a strange woman sitting on her bed. The woman was lighting a cigarette. “Hey, want a drag?” she said.

“Where am I?” asked Ellen. “Where is this place?”

“So you don’t remember, huh? Well, this is Detox. It’s where all us drunks end up now and then. Not a bad place. They give you some valium, some breakfast, keep you a few hours, then they give you a bus ticket to get home. You do have to attend on AA lecture first though. And . . . it’s due to start in half an hour so you had better get dressed!”

“Forget it, I’m not going to any AA meeting. That is for drunks and I’m not a drunk. I just had too much last night, that’s all.”

“Yep, that’s what we all say,” replied the woman cheerfully.

A nurse came in with a tray on which were a paper container with a white tablet, some orange juice, milk and cereal, and two pieces of toast.

Ellen’s stomach turned over, but she took the white tablet and drank the milk. Then she meekly dressed and followed the nurse out to the next room where the meeting was being held.

“Good morning everyone . . . this is your Saturday morning AA meeting. Glad you could all come.”

A few snickers rippled through the room.

Ellen sat in a daze, barely listening, blinking to with a start when everyone stood and in a circle joined hands. Then she heard the Lord’s Prayer.

“And forgive up our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

The words burned in Ellen’s head. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she sobbed openly. The woman who had been sitting on Ellen’s bed came over and took her arm, gently guiding her back to her room and to her bed.

“God will never forgive me for what I have done,” cried Ellen.

The woman patted her on the shoulder, then held her hand while Ellen lay on her back and cried.

Later Ellen awoke to see another woman standing near her bed.

“Hi,” she said, “I’m Fern, and I’m with the County Mental Health Department. I’d like to help you with any problems you

have. You can be assured that everything is confidential that you tell me. There are some programs in this county that may help you. I am here to try to help you overcome your dependence on the drug alcohol. We have a very good outpatient program close to your home and we can set you up for nightly meetings to help you solve your problems.”

“Well, thank you, Fern, was it? Yes, well, thank you, but I really don’t have any problems. I just had a little too much to drink last night and my daughter and I got into a small argument, and well, I ended up here. But, I can assure you, that I am not an alcoholic. And I don’t need your services!”

“OK, Ellen, whatever you say. But please, take my card, and if you ever want to talk to someone, just give us a call. We really would like to help you.”

After Fern left, Ellen’s roommate came back into the room. She sat on Ellen’s bed, “I know how you feel, kiddo, it’s hard to take at times. Me, I know I’ an alcoholic, but I don’t want to quit. I’m still having too much fun!” and she rambled on telling Ellen little anecdotes about herself. After a while, Ellen started laughing at some of the strange things that had happened to this woman who called herself and alcoholic.

“You know kiddo, that you can go home whenever you like – now don’t get up – why don’t you stay for a day? You will feel better and the food isn’t bad here. If you stay for a day, things will calm down at home and it will be easier when you do go home. Believe me, I know!”

“I guess you’re right, but I will definitely go home tomorrow. I have to go to work on Monday and they are already looking at me funny. I don’t dare miss another day . . .”

“Sure kiddo, well, happy stay, I’m off to my old man. Hope he is sober when I get home! I just hate to go home to a drunk! You know what I mean?”

On Sunday morning, Ellen told the desk that wanted to leave. They signed her out and told her she could call for a ride if she liked. She phoned Karen.

“You’re out of your gourd, Mom, I’m not coming for you. You can stay there until you get well. You can stay a week and that is what you are going to do!”

“No, I’m not, Karen, I’m going to work tomorrow, so come and get me!”

“Forget it!” said Karen and slammed the receiver down in her mother’s ear.

Ellen knew she was at least ten miles from home. She sat down on the bench and thought about her problem. The orderly called over to her from the desk, “Did you get a ride?”

“No, I didn’t. My daughter can’t come – something wrong with the car,” lied Ellen.

“Well, here, come on over and take a bus ticket. You can transfer when you get to Adams Street and get the #4 bus. It will take you within five block of your home.”

“Gee, thanks,” said Ellen gratefully.

“Nothing to it, babe,” said the orderly.

The bus ride took over an hour by the time Ellen had transferred but at last she was nearly home. The five block to her house seemed like five miles and she was sweating when she walked through the kitchen door.

“So, you’re back,” Karen’s voice came from behind the refrigerator door.

“Yes, I’m back, no thanks to you. I had to walk all the way,” lied Ellen.

“Gee, that’s too bad, Mom.” said Karen with a smile. “I really feel sorry for you!”

Shrugging her shoulders, Ellen moved through the kitchen on her way to the back of the house. In the living room were two guys asleep on the floor in sleeping bags. As she passed Karen’s room she saw Steve sitting on Karen’s bed and as she passed Angie’s room she saw Kelly, pulling on his jeans.

“Hi, Mom,” said Kelly. Thanks for letting me come back!”

Chapter XIV

Ellen tried to not drink. She told herself she would not drink all day. In fact she wouldn't have a drink until she got home from work on Monday. That would give her something to look forward to. Quietly she checked her stashes. Yes, they were all still there, but she resolved that she wouldn't have a drink, at least not now. She changed her clothes, in the closet. At least it still had a door on it. She wondered if she could work up some way to lock herself in the closet and sleep in there, but changed her mind as she knew the air would soon get stuffy and stale.

After she had changed, she went back to the kitchen and set about cleaning it up. She found some coke and drank it, ate a cracker and some peanut butter. Kelly being in the house was unnerving, but she refused to think about it. After all, what more could possibly happen? It had already all happened. She fed Mouse then went back to the sewing room, intending to do some ironing. When she opened the door, she saw that the loom was covered with a white sticky substance.

“Karen! What happened in here?”

“Relax, Mom, one of Kelly's friends got a hold of the fire extinguisher and shot it off, it won't hurt anything.”

Ellen felt sick. All her thread, patterns and loose material were covered in goo. She couldn't believe the mess. She would never be able to clean it up, but would have to replace most of the thread. The surfaces were Formica and they wiped off, but the thread and the hanks of yarn in the basket were ruined. She began to wonder why she had ever wanted children. She set to work and cleaned up the mess as best she could.

In the afternoon, the kids all left. There was a picnic planned at the lake and the all took off in their various mode of transportation. At last Ellen was alone in the house and she moved out to the deck to sit in the sun.

“I love my Mom, but I can't stand her drinking!”

There was the voice again . . . and another voice so low that Ellen couldn't make out the words, answering Karen, then

Karen's voice again. "Why doesn't she quit? Can't she see how awful she is? I can't stand her drinking!"

Ellen walked out onto the lawn, walked around the house, walked into the house, looking for Karen, but she couldn't find her. She sat on the sofa, holding her hands over her ears, but she still heard the voice, "I love my Mom, but I can't stand her drinking!"

"Karen, stop it, stop it! Please don't keep saying that!" cried Ellen.

Then the other voice, quietly murmuring. Karen's voice again, "Why doesn't she stop? I hate her when she is drinking!"

Ellen got to her feet, then ran through the house, tearing open the closet doors, looking under the beds, running out to the garage, though the door to the yard and running around the house.

"Karen! Karen!" she called, but there was no sign of her daughter.

Off in the distance, around the corner, came the voice, "I love my Mom, but I can't stand her drinking!"

Sobbing, Ellen ran back into the house, and knocking the clock radio to the floor, she grabbed the jam jar with the vodka and unscrewing the top, she gulped it down, crying, "Stop, please stop saying that!"

Chapter XV

Ellen's drinking began to take its toll. Her hair grew limp and her complexion sallow. Life no longer seemed very funny. She could not get up when she awoke unless she managed to swallow some vodka first. Even then she often threw the drink up hard and had to try to keep the next one down or deal with the dry heaves. Her bowels ran and she blamed the food she was eating, so she seldom ate. She realized that she was ill, very ill, and that she needed care. In desperation she called her mother.

"Hi, Mama, it's me, Ellen."

"What is it, Ellen. You sound funny. Are you drinking?"

"Yes, I am, and Mama, I need some help."

"Why, are you out of money or something?"

"Well, in a way. I lost my job —"

"Ellen, if you will send me your bills, I will pay them, but I won't send you money or you will just go out and drink it up. Why don't you call Warren and ask him to take you back?"

"Maybe I will, Mama. Thanks for the advice. Do you think I could come home for a while?"

"Oh, Ellen, you know that wouldn't work out. You should quit drinking and you know that I like to have a few and I don't want to stop drinking just because you are back. Besides, you should stay with your daughter. Now just be a good girl and call Warren. I'm sure he can help."

"Sure, thanks, Mama."

When Ellen called Warren she was drunk. She had had quite a few in order to get up the nerve for this phone call. Unfortunately Warren knew Ellen well enough to know she was drunk from the first word. It was what she said that threw him.

"Warren, this is Ellen. I've decided that I want to be married to you again. I'm sick and need someone to take care of me. So, will you marry me and take care of me?"

"Ellen, I still love you, but I won't marry you. You are drunk and don't know what you are saying. Now you get some help and get well and then we will talk about marriage."

“But, Warren, I need you.”

“Sorry, Ellen, I just can’t do it. I couldn’t handle you and your drinking before and I can’t handle it now.”

“You rotten son of a bitch!” screamed Ellen. “I’ll make you pay for turning me down. And by the way, speaking of paying, where is the child support money for Karen this month?”

“I gave it to Karen. She is a lot more responsible that you are right now.”

“But I have the house payment to make. Karen will just spend it on clothes and partying.”

“That’s a lot better than the booze you would buy with it!” and Warren hung up.

Fuming with anger, Ellen threw her glass against the wall, the liquid staining the wallpaper. “You can all go rot, for all I care,” she screamed at the world. “I will just drink myself to death and then you’ll all be sorry – sorry for what you have done to me!”

Grabbing her short leather jacket and scarf she headed for the bedroom window and the fence. She didn’t even stop to think that no one was home and she could go out the door. She almost ran to the bar and her favorite spot.

Two beers later she had calmed down. When the bartender put another beer in front of her, she looked up, questioning. The bartender pointed to the man at the other end of the bar. He was wearing a suit and a hat. He seemed like an alright guy – not scroungy looking – rather short and dark, but regular features. Ellen nodded her thanks and she walked down to her end of the bar and sat down next to her.

“Hello,” he said, “my name is James. You look like a lady who needs a friend.”

Chapter XVI

“Why don’t we sit at a table?” said James, and he took Ellen by the elbow and guided her to a table in the back of the bar. “There, that’s better. Now we can talk more privately. Now, don’t get me wrong, I don’t want to intrude on you if you want to be alone. You just look sad, that I thought you might like someone to talk with. You don’t have to worry about me, I assure you I am perfectly safe! Ah, I see you have questions in your lovely eyes.”

“Well, yes I do,” said Ellen. “I don’t remember seeing you in here before but I like the fact that you are wearing nice clothes, like a suit and hat. Most men wear slacks and a sport shirt now and it is nice to see a suit again. Why don’t you tell me something about yourself?”

“Well, I’m afraid that I can’t tell you too much. You see, I am in rather confidential work. I work for the government and I am just passing through town. I am supposed to pick up my next assignment from a party here in this town.”

“Assignment? That sounds pretty exciting and mysterious, sort of like you are an agent of something.”

“Say, you are pretty clever! Actually, I am. You remember the Patty Hearst case? Well, I worked on that. They use me quite often because I am able to blend in with the scenery, so to speak, you know, I am cursed with the kind of face that everyone seems to forget, so I am able to carry message and glean some valuable information. But you must promise to not give me away.”

“Oh, I won’t,” promised Ellen. “Gosh, this is so exciting. To think that I am talking to someone who worked on the Patty Hearst case. That is really something! Tell me, were you there when the burned down that house?” James nodded. “And were you aftger her after she robbed the bank?” Again he nodded. “And do you use a code name and all that?”

“Yes, I do. And I know this is going to sound a little strange, and of course I have to swear you to secrecy.”

“Oh yes,” breathed Ellen, “I swear not to tell a soul.”

“Well, I go by the code name of ‘James Bond’. I’ll bet you never thought you would meet James Bond!”

“Oh, this is really great. I am so excited!”

“Don’t forget, you promised not to talk about it. Now, tell me, what could be troubling such a sweet looking lady as yourself?”

“Well, it all started last March when my daughter’s former boyfriend broke into my house and beat my daughter and myself,” said Ellen. James reached over and took her hand in his. “Then things just seemed to go from bad to worse. I had a car accident, my daughter and I have been arguing a lot. I had trouble with my son, and how I am on leave from my job. With all my problems, I couldn’t concentrate on my work and they told me to leave for a while. I am so tired of struggling and fighting so hard to keep body and soul together. I yearn for the simpler life! I hope to find some other kind of work to do that will be more fun, and not so much stress.”

“You poor little lady. I think you need someone to look after you. Someone who is wise to the ways of the world. Tell you what, why don’t you tag along with me for the next day or two? I’m going to be in town until I get reassigned and who knows? I may even get to take a leave for awhile. In fact I have been thinking of retiring, after all why wait until you are old to retire? Why not enjoy life now?”

Ellen nodded her head sadly, thinking of Tom Roberts, dead at 47. He never got a chance to retire and enjoy doing the thing he dreamed of.

“Don’t look so sad, Ellen. Your life is going to change, starting right now. You have a bright new future ahead of you.” Suddenly James frowned, then whispered, “Don’t look now, but a man just came in who is a double agent. He appears to be alone, but we can’t take any chances. Get your jacket and let’s get out of here!”

Ellen hastily slid into her jacket, picked up her purse and holding onto James's arm, walked him through the door out to the parking lot.

James walked her to the large Lincoln Continental. After Ellen's little MG, the Continental seemed enormous. James opened the door and Ellen sat on the luxurious cushion. When James had started the car, he drove slowly out onto street. Ellen whispered to him, "Do you think everything is OK? Did he spot you?"

"No, he didn't notice me. No one is used to seeing me with a lovely woman so I am certain he didn't recognize me. Say, what do you think about driving down to Santa Barbara?"

"But, I thought you had to wait for a contact here?"

"Well, sure, but that contact has been missed now, and that means that I have two days before the next contact is due. Santa Barbara is very nice this time of year, so how about it?"

"Sure, why not?" said Ellen. "It would be fun and no one will miss me anyway."

"Don't worry about stopping for any clothes or things. We will stop and buy whatever we need."

"Terrific," said Ellen. "I haven't been to Santa Barbara for years and with the full moon tonight, it will be beautiful drive."

James guided the powerful car through town, On the outskirts, he pulled into a gas station and had the tank filled. After the car had been serviced, James turned the key in the ignition, but nothing happened. He tried again. Still nothing. "Don't worry, Ellen," he said, "this car has done this before. It is very aggravating that the government can't give me a decent car! I am going to insist on a different one for my next assignment."

He signaled to the attendant to come over and together they tried to get the big car started, but to no avail.

"Sorry, buddy," said the attendant, "but I can't help you any longer. It is quitting time and the boss is very fussy about closing on time. There's a pay phone over there. Why don't you call and get a friend to come out and help you?"

“That’s OK,” said James. “This monster will probably start all by itself after a while. You go ahead and go home, close up or whatever you have to do. Thanks for trying to help.”

The attendant closed down the station, turned off the lights and Ellen and James were left alone in the darkness. Ellen remorsefully said, “James, I think I am bad luck. Everything seems to happen to me.”

“Now, don’t you fret. The car will start soon. In the meantime, let’s just sit here and relax a bit.” He reached over and pulled her to him, holding her close to his side. Ellen sighed and laid her head on this shoulder. Gently he raised her head and softly kissed her. “Poor little thing,” he said.

“They sat there in the moonlight. James told Ellen about his son who was eight, abandoned by his mother and now being cared for by Jame’s own mother. Ellen felt tears welling up in her eyes thinking about the poor little boy deserted by his mother.

James was stroking her arm, then he moved his hand over to her breast. “How gentle he is,” thought Ellen, and she raised her face to be kissed.

As they embraced, James grew bolder and ran his hand over her leg, inching her skirt up. All the passion that had been denied to Ellen seemed to be at last there and she wildly pulled him down on top of her, reaching for his pants, and soon they were removing portions of their clothes in a desperate need, clutching at each other and finally locked together on the front seat of the Lincoln.

“Ellen, Ellen, I really care for you. You and I were meant for each other. This is Karma. Our lives are destined to be entwined. You must give yourself only to me. I will quit the Agency and get my son and you will be a good mother to him, a good wife to me and I will take care of you for the rest of your life.”

“Oh, James, this is really so soon. We barely know each other and yet, yet it seems as though it is all so right. I have been looking for someone to take care of me. Let’s think about it for a few days just be sure, though.”

“I am already sure, my sweet one,” murmured James in her ear.

A large truck rumbled by and James reached over and blinked the Lincoln’s headlights.

“What did you do that for?” asked Ellen.

“Ah, sweetness, that is a signal. He was letting me know that the coast is clear and that we can move on.”

“But how could you tell?” asked Ellen, “He looked just like an ordinary old truck to me.”

“I know, that is what is so tricky about this business of mine. One has to know and be watchful all the time. Even when I am with you I am still watchful. I know that truck was one of ours. Poor little one, so you didn’t realize how complicated this life of mine was. I have to be very clever and alert at all times. That is why I drink very little, but I do have my vices. I smoke, but only Camels. I shall explain that to you later. But come, let’s try this huge car and see if she will decide to go now.”

He turned the key in the ignition and the car purred to life. James left the gas station and headed back to the center of the city. “Let’s postpone our trip to Santa Barbara, my love. It is nearly morning and I am very weary. Do you suppose that we could sleep for a few hours at your home?”

“Of course,” said Ellen and she told him the way to go.

Dawn was breaking when they drove into Ellen’s driveway. The house was quiet and for once no one was sleeping on the living room floor. Ellen took James by the hand and let him back to the bedroom. He looked at her questioningly about the door to the bedroom and n whispers she told him that her daughter had it removed.

“I shall fix it for you tomorrow, my pet, and we shall purchase a lock for the door and then on one can come in except us.”

“Oh, thank you, James, that would be wonderful,” said Ellen.

Ellen excused herself and went into the bathroom. Her bladder was about to explode and she needed another drink. It

had been hours since she had had a drink and was beginning to feel shaky. She slowly drank the vodka in the jar behind the curtain on the window then brushed her teeth and returned to the bedroom. James was sound asleep as she slide into bed and sank herself into a seamless sleep.

It was late afternoon when Ellen awakened. James was standing at the window, smoking a cigarette.

“Ah, you are awake. You must have been very tired to sleep so hard and so long,” he said.

“Yes, I was, but I feel pretty good now, in fact better that I have felt in a long time,” answered Ellen.

“That is because your life has already begun its change. Already you are feeling great things ahead. Now, let’s go out and meet your family. I am most anxious to see them.”

“Well, I know you will have to meet them, but you must remember that they are very independent and are full grown, not like your little boy.”

“If they are your children, I shall care for them as though they are my own,” said James.

“OK,” said Ellen, “you asked for it.”

Karen was sitting at the kitchen table, putting on her makeup. She had already snuck a peak into mother’s bedroom and had been surprised to see a man sleeping in her mother’s bed. She had also seen and gone through the Continental parked in the driveway. When Ellen and James walked into the kitchen hand in hand, she raised her eyebrow, but remained silent. “This should be good,” she thought.

“Good morning, Karen,” said Ellen, “I want you to meet a very special friend of mine. This is James Wright, and he is going to make a few changes around here!”

“Hello,” said Karen.

“I’m vry pleased to meet the daughter of Ellen,” said James. “You are very beautiful, like your mother.”

“Oh, Mom,” thought Karen, “I wonder where you found this guy!”

Chapter XVII

James and Ellen drove to the local hardware store where a lock and hasp were purchased. The lock came with two keys and James took one, handing the other to Ellen, “Here, my pet, now just you and I shall be able to go into your room.”

They drove straight home and James put up the door, then installed the lock and hasp. Ellen breathed a sigh of relief for finally she had her privacy back and she had someone who wanted to take care of her. She felt safe once more. Karen watched the proceedings silently, then turned and left for work.

As Karen was driving to work, she wondered about this stranger her mother had brought home. For one thing, it wasn't like her mother to bring anyone home. She knew that Lloyd had been there for she had seen him leaving once, but as far as she knew, that was the only man her mother had ever had in her home. Karen had a funny feeling about this man, sort of an uneasy feeling. “Boy, I'm really getting silly,” she thought, “some stranger shows up and I start to freak out. Well, at least Mom will be busy with him for a while and he can look out for her instead of my worrying all the time. He does have that big car which has to be worth something. At least he doesn't appear to be a bum or something. Besides, is Mom continues to drink as she has been, he won't stick around. Why, he'll probably be gone in a day or two anyway. I just won't worry about it unless he stays or causes problems.”

Turning into the parking lot, Karen parked the car. As she walked into work, she had another thought, “Kelly. Kelly was around now. Angie was gone, but Kelly was back. Surely if anything happens, Kelly and Steve can help me.” Feeling better, she walked through the door of the restaurant to go to work.

“Ellen, my love, I must go over to the watch repair shop and collect my watch.”

“Sure, James, whatever you say,” replied Ellen docilely.

“Would you loan me \$20 – I’m a bit short because my check for my last job hasn’t arrived yet, and I need to pick up my watch. It is very important.”

“Of course, I will, James,” said Ellen, and she handed him a twenty from her purse.

“Do you always carry cash, my pet?” asked James.

“Most of the time, it is just easier, but this happens to be from cashing my last check and I just stuck it in my purse.”

“Well, I can see that you should change some of your ways.” said James, “but come now, let’s go.”

Ellen waited in the car while James went into the small shop and retrieved his watch. When he returned to the car, he drove off a few blocks and stopped the car. He carefully opened the back of the watch, Ellen watched curiously. “Ah,” said James, “now I have my message!”

“But where is it?” asked Ellen.

“Why, it isn’t. That is the message!” replied James. “Since there isn’t a message in the case, then I am to stay here in town for awhile. But I must go to the Chinese restaurant tonight to confirm it.”

“But which one?” asked Ellen.

“Don’t worry,” replied James, “I know which one.”

Ellen had James stop off at the shopping center so she could pick up the MG and drive it home. When she got home, she found James in the bedroom closet, looking over her clothes. He took each dress out and held it up, pondering over it. Finally he selected a black dress and bowing slightly, he presented it to Ellen.

“Here, my sweet,” he said, “you will look lovely in this one. Please put it on for me – and do you have any pearls?”

“Yes, I do,” replied Ellen. “They are in my jewel case.”

“Oh, yes, that will be perfect. Now hurry and get dressed, we mustn’t be late.”

Half an hour later they entered the exotically decorated restaurant. James spoke briefly with the waitress and they were seated in a corner booth.

“Ellen, you must be my eyes. Please watch and tell me about everyone who comes and goes. I must stay out of sight.”

“Of course,” said Ellen, her eyes wide with wonder.

But Ellen almost forgot to watch. They had a few drinks and then ate a leisurely dinner. Ellen was fascinated with James. He had so many strange and wonderful things to talk about. He was well read, quoting different authors at random. He had led such a different life than she had and she was impressed.

When it was ten, James signaled waitress for the check. “Come, Ellen, it is time to go,” he said.

“But you didn’t get your signal, or did you?”

“Yes, I did. Once again, it was that I didn’t receive a signal that gives me the answer that I needed. They want me to stay here for a while.”

On the drive home, James stopped at a convenience store and leaving Ellen in the car, he went inside. When he came out, he was carrying a bag. “From now on, my sweet, you must drink only this brand of wine. It is best for you.”

“Whatever you say, James,” said Ellen. She looked into the bag and saw the brand and wondered. It was a sweet kosher wine. “Oh, well, what difference did it make, it’s alcohol,” she thought.

They sat up most of the night, sipping the sweet wine. Karen came home alone and went to bed. Kelly came in at two and also went to bed, merely nodding at James when introduced. Ellen was amazed at how quiet the two were. It seemed to her that they respected James and she was pleased.

The next night they again went to the Chinese restaurant. The same procedure followed and once again no one appeared. James appeared satisfied although he cautioned Ellen to be watchful and he grew very angry when a stranger muttered apologies as he brushed into Ellen in the hall. “You must never talk to strangers,” he cautioned as he took her elbow and guided her out the door.

“But he didn’t say anything except ‘excuse me’ for bumping into me,” said Ellen.

“You must do exactly as I say, Ellen, or there will be trouble,” replied James.

“OK,” murmured Ellen meekly.

The next evening they stayed home, with Ellen cooking a simple dinner. They watched television for a while and went to bed early. Ellen managed to sneak a few sips of her hidden vodka before showering and getting into bed. Moonlight was streaming through the window casting patterns on the bed. James reached over for her and she responded, feeling his arousal against her leg. He pulled the bedclothes back and raised her gown. Quickly he entered her. Ellen suddenly realized that this was only the second time they had made love since she had met him, but the thought was pushed from her mind as he increased the tempo of his thrusting.

“Ellen, Ellen, are you there?”

A voice was coming from somewhere, somewhere outside, and it was a very familiar voice.

“Ellen, please answer me. I want to talk to you. Let me help you, please answer me!”

“Who is that” hissed James, stopping his thrusts.

“It sounds like an old friend of mine,” said Ellen. “Be quiet and maybe he will go away.”

Suddenly a face appeared in the window, outlined in the moonlight. It was Lloyd.

“Ellen, what are you doing? Oh, my god, Ellen how could you?”

Shock was in Lloyd’s eyes, horror that his Ellen was underneath this stranger, naked together, and it was obvious what they were doing.

“Go away, Lloyd, go away.” cried Ellen.

Lloyd disappeared from the window. James got up and moved silently to the window, then looked out, but Lloyd was gone.

“Who was that?” asked James. “Why did he come to see you in your bedroom window?”

“Just and old friend. He was worried about me because he knew I had been sick. I’m sorry he disturbed you, James. Please, it doesn’t mean anything. Come back to bed, he’s gone and he won’t come back.”

“He had better not come back. You are mine now, Ellen, and you will understand that.”

Getting back into bed, he pulled up the covers and rolled away from Ellen and went to sleep. Ellen laid there for a while, staring out at the moonlight, a tear rolling down her face, then she brushed it away.

At breakfast the next day, James announced, “Ellen, we must be married as soon as possible.”

“But James, we barely know each other, it has been only a few days since we met.”

“Some thing do not take time. I have made up my mind that you are the woman for me. I need you to be a wife and a mother for my son, and you need me to take care of you. You will start a new life with me. We will live in Los Angeles and your children may live with us also if they wish, and you may bring your cat. Se is a good friend. Cats are important. So we must make our plans. Let us go to the courthouse and get a license today.”

Just then Karen came into the room. Ellen moved over to her daughter and hugged her. “Guess what, Karen, James has just asked to me to marry him!”

“What Are you crazy? Mom, you barely know this guy!”

“I know him well enough, He has promised to take care of me. We are going to move to Los Angeles and you and Kelly can come too.”

“Not on your life, Mom, and you aren’t going to marry anyone. Are you drunk again? James, if that is your name, do you really want to marry a drunk? Why you don’t know what she will do next. Believe me, my mother is a very sick woman. Why you must be crazy to want to marry her!”

“Your mother is a lovely woman and yes, I do want to marry her. I realize that is not well, but I shall see to it that she gets the best care. I will protect her from evil. There is evil in this house

and as soon as she is out of here, she will get well. I will see to that.”

“Why you are nuts! Mom, can’t you see this is all wrong?”

“No, I can’t Karen. That is wrong with my having a little happiness?”

“Nothing, Mom, so long as it is real. I don’t believe this guy. Why you barely know him.”

“Please, James, can I tell Karen who you are? Then she will understand.”

James nodded his head.

“Karen, James is really an undercover agent for the CIA. He was in on the Patty Hearst case. He is going to retire and we will live on this pension. You will see, we will be very happy. Please be happy for me, Karen!”

“Mom, I really believe you have lost your mind. How could you possibly swallow all that? Why this little creep couldn’t be a government agent! I’m going to call Pop about this. At least you can’t get married for three days - “ retorted Karen. She went out the kitchen through the garage, slamming the door behind her.

“Don’t worry about her, my pet,” said James, “she will come around once she gets used to the idea.”

“I know she will. It is probably such a shock for her. I had better call my mother though and give her the news. She will be happy for me, I know. She wanted me to be married.”

However, Ellen’s mother was anything but pleased with the news that her daughter was planning marriage.

“Ellen, now I know you are sick. How can you possibly marry someone you have just met? Are you drunk?”

“Thanks, Mama, for giving me your blessing,” said Ellen and she put the phone back on the hook. “She;s really happy for me and is anxious to meet you,” she told James, smiling.

Chapter XVIII

James told Ellen to take her car, the little MG, as he liked the small car. When Ellen looked for the key, it was nowhere to be found.

“Karen, have you seen the key to the MG?” asked Ellen.

“I am sure have, Mom, and you can’t have it.”

“For heaven’s sake, why not? You know that I am OK – that I am sober, so why did you take the key?”

“For the simple reason, dear mother, that I intend to do everything I can to slow you down in this so called marriage you want to go through with.”

“Young lady,” said James, “I can see that you need to be taught some manners. As soon as I am your step-father, we shall see that you are more respectful to your mother.”

“Yeah? Well, we’ll just see about that,” smirked Karen.

“Never mind, James.” said Ellen. “We can still take the car. I could have done this before, but I really didn’t care if I drove the car or not. Now I care, and I intend to drive that car.”

Going out to the garage, Ellen lifted up the hood of the car and reaching in, she removed one of the fuses, then placed it immediately next to the other fuse. Getting behind the wheel, she pulled the starter and the car roared to life.

“Come on, James, let’s go get married!”

“Ellen, you amaze me!”

“It’s nothing, just a little trick I learned from a mechanic.”

“Twenty minutes later, James and Ellen arrived at the county courthouse where Ellen parked the car. With the fuse in the running position, the car would not stop as there was no key to turn off the ignition, so Ellen lifted up the hood and removed the fuse. The car’s motor coughed and stopped.

“See, it’s really quite easy!” laughed Ellen.

A few minutes later and they were standing in front of the license burea. “We would like a marriage license, please.” said James.

“Of course,” replied the young woman behind the counter, “just fill out this form and I’ll be right with you.”

“Tell me, miss, is there a waiting period? That is, can we be married today?”

“Well, that depends. Do have your blood tests completed?”

Ellen and James shook their heads.

“And what is your age, ma’am?”

“I’m 42,” replied Ellen.

“Well, I’m sorry, but unless you are 50 or older, you must show proof of rubella immunization or you must have the shot and wait three days for the result.”

“But I had measles as a child,” explained Ellen.

“That my be, but the State requires that any woman of child-bearing age about to be married, must show proof.”

“But, I can’t have any more children,” moaned Ellen, “I had a hysterectomy five years ago!”

“Well, in that case, you can get a statement from your doctor to that effect and we can waive the immunization.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful! Come on, James, let’s go to the doctor’s office and get his statement!”

Fifteen minutes later Ellen was breathlessly explaining to the receptionist that she needed proof that she had had a hysterectomy.

“But Mrs. Thompson, that was over five years ago and all those records are in storage. I would just ask the Doctor, but he is out today and so I will have to find the old records. It will take several hour. Oh, don’t look so disappointed, I’ll do my best. Come back at two this afternoon and I hope I will have good news for you.”

Sadly Ellen left the doctor’s office with James. “James, I need something to drink. Please let’s stop at a liquor store and pick up a six pack of beer.”

“Of course, my pet, after all, it is our wedding day. You see, I have faith that the young woman will find the records and all will be well. You and I shall soon be married!”

“James, you are so good to me, and I promise that I will be the best of wives to you.”

They took the six pack over to a nearby park to drink. The sun was shining through the bare limbed trees, casting myriad patterns on the grass. The two hours passed slowly with little conversation between the two. Ellen drank two beers, methodically pulling the scraggly grass in front of her apart with her fingers. James sat close by, barely touching his can of beer, watching his intended.

At last the little watch on Ellen’s wrist indicated the hour had come and they walked back to the doctor’s office.

The receptionist greeted them with a smile, waving a piece of paper. “See, I told you, Mrs. Thompson, I found it for you!”

“Oh, thank you, thank you so much. You don’t know how much this means to me!”

“I just hope you will be very happy,” answered the young woman.

“Oh, we will, I just know we will!”

They rushed back to the courthouse, armed with the precious paper. There they completed the license form and then were told they would have to wait for an hour until the judge was free. They sat on a hard, long bench, and watched the clock on the wall.

It was almost four in the afternoon when they were finally ushered into the judge’s chambers.

“James, we don’t have a ring!” groaned Ellen.

“Never mind, my sweet one, we will use the pearl ring you have on your right hand.”

“But, James,” sighed Ellen, “my last husband gave it to me.”

“Nothing matter that is in the past. Ellen dear, we have only the future ahead of us!”

“Please join hands,” said the judge, “and we will begin.”

A few minutes later the ceremony was over and James kissed softly on her lips. “Now we are truly one, my love,” he said.

The judge signed the marriage certificate and gave it to James and Ellen. “Best of luck to you, Mr. and Mrs. Wright,” he said.

“Thank you sir,” murmured James, shaking the judge’s hand.

Ellen and James walked down the long corridor of the courthouse, hand in hand. Ellen looked at the old familiar pearl ring on her finger, now it was her wedding ring and a new life stretched out in front of her.

“Oh, isn’t it wonderful, James” she asked, “Just think, only five days ago I met you and now we are married. I can hardly believe it! I am so glad that I am going to have a new life! Oh, what day is it? I must always remember this day!”

“It is November the 10th, 1975, and it is our happy wedding day,” replied James.

Chapter XIX

“Ellen, my lovely wife, let us eat in tonight. I want to be alone with you.”

“Of course, James, we will have a nice quiet dinner at home to celebrate our wedding day. But what shall I fix?”

“Let’s get some lamb, it is my favorite, and part of my heritage. It is time you learned about your husband and how to please him.”

That evening Ellen cooked the lamb and served it rice and fresh fruit. They toasted each other with the sweet wine that James preferred. After the meal was over and Ellen had cleared the table, James took out a cigarette.

“Look, my wife, I want to show you something.”

“Of course, my husband. My, that sounds nice!”

“Do you see the camel on the cigarette package? Well, it has many meanings. You can see all sorts of shapes and pictures on his golden hide. You can see all sorts of shapes and pictures on his golden hide. Someday soon, I shall explain many of these things to you.” Then he turned the package over. “Now, see the beautiful buildings? Someday I shall take you there, for that is my home, my real home.”

“Oh, come on now, James, that is just a make believe picture of a castle, probably in Turkey or someplace.”

“No, Ellen, most people think that it isn’t real, but it is. I have been there. And this building with the round fat dome on it is my ancestral home. It belongs to me and now it belongs to you also because you are my queen!”

“Well, that is wonderful,” said Ellen skeptically, “I’ve always wanted to be a queen!”

“Ah, you hesitate, and I fear that you do not believe me. You must always believe you husband, my wife, that is what being a good wife is, but I understand your doubts. You have much to learn. I have not told you too much about myself because it is forbidden to do so, but now that we are married, I can at last tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“That you are indeed a queen now, not that you are my wife, am I am a king. Yes, I am a real king. My people will welcome you because you are good and so beautiful.”

“But what are you king of?”

“Why, Ellen, can’t you guess? I am the king of the gypsies!”

Ellen looked at her husband with widening eyes. Yes, he was rather dark complexioned and he did speak a little strangely at times. How strange it was that she had been so lowly, and now she had been elevated to become a queen. Ellen found it very hard to believe, but James was looking at her sternly, so she nodded her head in agreement.

“But what about your being an undercover agent?”

“Who else, but a gypsy could do it so well?” answered James. “But as I told you, I wish to retire from that life and go back to my people and take my rightful place on the throne. However, we must be very careful as there are evil ones who might try to kill me and take my place. So, there are things we must do to this house to protect ourselves. Get me all the decks of cards that you have in the house, quickly!”

Ellen hurried to obey. She found four decks of cards and brought them to James.

He opened each deck and removed the Ace of Spades. “This card is very dangerous, for it means death, but it can help us also. We must place it over the door like this!”

With a quick movement, he grabbed the card, and pinned it to the wall over the door, right side up, with a small paring knife.

“That card must stay there at all times, for if it comes down, then evil can come in that door!”

Rifling through the other decks, he removed the Ace of Spades from the other decks. One he placed over their bedroom door, one over the front door and the last card he placed behind the wall mirror. “There, that will protect us. I see you questioning me. You are wondering about the card behind the

mirror? Well, that is so evil cannot come directly into our eyes as we look into the mirror!”

Going to the desk, he removed a box of gold stars which he pasted in various spots on the bedroom ceiling. “Now, the stars will let goodness in and they will bless us.”

“Oh, my,” said Ellen, “I can see that I have a lot to learn about your people.”

“Our people, Ellen, yours and mine.” He took her hand in his, fingering the pearl ring. “Pearls are white and pure, a perfect symbol of our new life together. Come now, we must go to bed and rest.”

“Oh, yes, it is our wedding night, but of course we have already made love, but tonight we will do it as man and wife.”

“No, my wife, tonight we lay apart. It is the custom of my people that the bride and groom do not touch each other on their first night as newlyweds.”

“I can see that I have have a lot to learn,” said Ellen, “but then we have a long life ahead of us and there will be plenty of other nights.”

As Ellen drifted off to sleep, she thought how very different it was – this wedding night – from her first wedding night with Warren!”

Chapter XX

“Ellen, wake up!”

Ellen slowly opened her eyes. James was bending over her, a glass of orange juice in his hand. The clock radio told her that it was after nine in the morning.

“Good, you are awake at last. We have much to do today so you must hurry and get dressed!”

“But what? What is so important, James?”

“My wife, we must go shopping for a few things, things to protect ourselves with for you have nothing of that kind around this house. Now get up and get dressed and I shall bring you a cup of coffee.”

When James had left the room, Ellen slide her hand behind the books on the shelf and retrieved one of her jars of vodka and poured an ample amount into the orange juice. She didn't feel too bad this morning but she might as well be prepared for the day was of thinking and rationalizing the alcohol. After she had dressed, she met James in the kitchen where she waved aside the cup of coffee he offered.

“Tell me, James, just what is it that is so important that we must do this morning?”

“Come, let us go over to Sears. Do you have a charge card there?” Ellen nodded. “Good, then I shall explain once we are there I am certain they will have what we need.”

When they arrived at the department store, Ellen followed James through the store. He stopped at a cutlery display and studied the various knives. Then he looked around and sped off to the sporting goods department where he signaled for a clerk. “Miss,” he said, “will you unlock this case and let me examine the rifles?”

“Certainly, sire, just what sort of rifle did you wish to look at?”

“Well, I am interested in hunting, not small animals, but large ones like deer.”

“I think you might be interested in these three then,” said the young woman, and she placed three rifles on the counter in front of James.

Ellen was amazed. James had never mentioned hunting before. And furthermore Ellen did not like to hunt. The thought of killing an animal was distasteful to her, but she kept silent.

James examined each rifle carefully and finally selected one, a 30-30. “Ellen,” he said, “would you put in on the charge card, please?”

“Of course, James,” Ellen replied, and she handed the girl her card.

“You will also have to sign these forms, Ma’am.”

“Whatever,” murmured Ellen, very puzzled about the whole procedure.

They also purchased two boxes of shells and then James intimated that they were to do home.

When they arrived home, James led the way to the deck. Unpacking the rifle, he loaded two shells into the chamber. “Come, Ellen, let’s try it out!”

“James, you can’t shoot a gun in the city! We’ll have the cops all over the place!”

“No we won’t Ellen. No one will pay any attention to one or two shots. Watch and you will see!” Going down onto the lawn, James stood about fifteen feet in front of the large tulip tree, then aimed and fired. The sound of the shot was not loud, sort of like a car backfiring. No one care out of their homes and started yelling, so Ellen relaxed. “Here, let me try shooting it,” she said.

James showed her how to hold the rifle. When Ellen pressed the trigger, the rifle bucked back into her shoulder and she nearly dropped it, but the shot hit the center of the tree. “Hey!” she exclaimed, “I did better than you did!”

“I think the rifle is slightly off range,” replied James. “Anyway, that is enough shooting for now. We have other things to do.”

Just then Karen came out of the house. “Whatever are you two doing – where did you get that gun?”

“Don’t you fret, Karen,” said James. “It is just something that we bought to protect ourselves with since there are so many strangers around this house.”

“Well, I don;t see why you have to protect yourselves with a rifle! Why that thing would probably blow a hole right though the house! Mom, I hope you aren’t going to keep that thing around.”

“Oh, relax Karen. I am sure that James know what he is doing. He has had lots of experience with guns and no one will get hurt. I am sure that is more to frighten someone than it is to shoot at someone, am I right James?”

“Why, of course, my love. I would not shoot at anyone unless I had to.”

“Well, that thing gives me the creeps.” said Karen, turning back into the house.

That afternoon, James and Ellen went to the bank where Ellen withdrew her savings and put them into a new account with her and James’ name together. Then they went to the post office where James applied for a post office box. He told the clerk that he wanted a box under the name of James Bond, but was told that at the present time there wasn’t an available box, but that he would have notified when one did become available. Next they visited a book store where James ordered a book. They James asked to be taken home as he wanted to watch the new on television. Ellen dropped him off and returned to the store for groceries, also picking up a fresh supply of wine and vodka. Some of her stashes were very low. She wasn’t sure if James realized how much she drank, but there wasn’t any need to let him know everything about her, so she rationalized that she would just buy a few more bottles and then she would taper off.

When Ellen got home, she fixed dinner and while James was occupied watching television, she replaced her supply of vodka. After dinner and several glasses of the sticky sweet wine, Ellen took a shower and went directly to bed. Karen came in and sat on her bother’s bed.

“Mom, I’m worried about this guy.”

“Karen, ‘this guy’ is the man I just married. He is now your step father.”

“I know all that Mom, but I can’t think of him as a step father. He just strikes me as kind of weird. I hope you will be very careful around him.”

“Why Karen, that is silly.” He is my husband and he loves me. He wants to take care of me. He would never hurt me. Now go on out of here and let me get some sleep. I’m really tired.”

“That’s another thing, Mom, why are you so tired? I don’t think you have been drinking that much, but you are almost asleep and it is only seven o’clock.”

“I don’t know, Karen, don’t bother me with all that now. Just left me sleep.”

Karen slowly left her mother’s room. She went out to the kitchen and sat at the round table and under the guise of doing her nails, spent an hour watching James. Finally she gave up as he refused to do anything strange, and she went out of the evening.

The next morning James again awakened Ellen. “Come, my wife, you must get dressed. We have things to do today. Important things.”

“Now what,” Ellen groaned. She felt groggy. Her tongue seemed to be thick like a carpet and she felt dizzy, but she got up and drank the orange juice James handed her.

“I want you to wear you black dress and pearls, my love and your highest heels.”

“Well if I do then I shall be taller than you,” replied Ellen.

“That is fine, my wife, for it is good to have a tall woman by my side.”

“What are we going to do today, James?”

“It is time that we visited my aunt in Oakland. I must announce to my family that we are married so they can prepare our coming home.”

They were almost to Oakland when James pulled over to a restaurant. “How would you like to stop for a drink? Now, don’t

look so surprised. I know that you drink and I know that you are nervous about meeting my family, so we will stop for a little drink so you will feel calmer.” Ellen nodded her head.

At the cocktail lounge, Ellen ordered a screwdriver and James ordered a coke. They stayed for over an hour, James seemingly not caring about the time, but suddenly he rose and indicated to Ellen that they must leave.

As they drove into the city, Ellen tried to figure out just where they were, but she was not familiar with Oakland as she was with San Francisco and she soon became confused so she sat back and idly watched the buildings pass. James finally parked the car in what appeared to Ellen to be an order section of the city. The buildings were all four or five stores high, old, with shabby exteriors. Small shops dominated the ground floors and apartments were overhead. They turned into a narrow stairway and ascended to the second floor where James knocked at a door. The door was answered by a dark-haired woman about fifty who opened the door by a crack, peering out, then with excited chatter in some strange language that Ellen could not understand, she flung open the door and embraced James. Ellen stood there bewildered while James and this dark woman spoke on and on. Gestures were made and at last James took her arm and guided her into the apartment.

“My beloved Aunt Zayda, this is my beloved wife, Ellen, We must speak English for her as she doesn’t understand our language.”

“I am very pleased to meet you, my dear, and welcome to our family,” said James’ aunt.

Ellen took the hand that was offered her and smiled saying, “Thank you, I am pleased to meet you also.”

Zayda immediately launched into another barrage at James in the strange language. Ellen sank down into a sofa and perched on the edge James would answer his aunt in English, but Zayda only spoke so Ellen could not understand. Even James’ replies didn’t make sense, so she gave up trying to understand and merely sat quietly watching the two people.

Zayda seemed angry at James. She shook her finger at him and James shrugged his shoulders. Then Zayda disappeared into the kitchen and came out a short time later with a tray on which were three cups of steaming coffee. Ellen gratefully took a cup of coffee, glad to have something to occupy her hands. Every now and then she felt Zayda's eyes on her and jumped a little.

Finally James rose and took Ellen's arm. "We must go now, Ellen. Thank you Aunt Zayda, for having us in your home."

"Yes," said Ellen, remembering her manners, "thank you and thank you for the coffee. It was delicious. I am very happy to have met you."

Zayda came over to Ellen and grasped her by the shoulders, looking into her eyes. Then she took Ellen's hand in hers and bent over and kissed her on her cheek. "Best wishes, little one," she said, then she shook her head. Ellen thought she looked sad, but there wasn't time to wonder about it as she had to get down that flight of stairs and her knees felt weak and trembly. Out on the street in the fresh air, Ellen felt better and decided that she was being foolish and imagining things.

On the ride home, James was silent and Ellen decided to bide her time and wait for him to explain things. Surely she would understand all in good time.

That evening James wanted to eat at a Mexican restaurant. Ellen had always liked Mexican food and she ate eagerly. After dinner they were sipping some beer slowly when she overheard the manager talking to the waitress. The small cafe was nearly empty and their conversation carried across the room. The manager was pleading to the girl to work the next day and the girl was refusing. She had other plans. She would work the evening shift, but not during day. Suddenly Ellen had an idea.

"James, what would you think if I got a new job? We are running out of money and your check still hasn't come. I could get a job here and work a few days until you get your check. It would be different work and I am certain I can do it. Please, James, let me try it!"

"Of course, whatever you wish."

Ellen was surprised at his quick response, but then James managed to surprise her a lot. She rose from her chair and approached the manager. “I am wondering if I could apply for a position here,” she said.

“Sure, honey, but all I need right now is someone to help out during the day. You would have to help with the cooking we do ahead of time and also clean the bathrooms. I only pay minimum wages, but if you are interested, be here at ten tomorrow morning.”

“Thanks, I will!” said Ellen. “Thanks a lot!”

The next day Ellen reported to work. She was soon peeling onions and garlic, dicing green peppers and tomatoes. After two hours the stove top was covered with huge pots simmering, pungent odors filled the air.

“Say, you’re pretty handy in a kitchen,” said the manager, “Have you done this kind of work before?”

“No, only at home. I’ve been a secretary most of my life.”

“Well, tell me, why did you want this job? It doesn’t pay much and it is a lot of hard work!”

“Well, I decided to make some change in my life. I was bored with being a secretary, so why not do something completely different?”

“Well, whatever your reason, I like having you here. And, I must add, that you are a very attractive woman. You sure have a sexy bottom.” And as he spoke, he patted Ellen’s behind.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t do that,” warned Ellen. “You see, I just got married the other day, and I happened to marry a king so now I am a queen!”

“Oh, come on now, you mean to say that I have a queen working my kitchen? Lady, you are something else!”

“I know it sounds strange, but I really am a queen! My husband is king of the gypsies and we well be going to our people soon. So – you had better keep your hands off!”

“Well, Queenie, how about scrubbing the bathroom?” sneered the manager.

The new queen spent the next hour scrubbing the restrooms, which to her weren't any worse than her own bathrooms after the kids had had a few friends over.

While Ellen was working her new job, Karen was watching James. "This turkey is really weird," she thought. He wrote numbers on pieces of paper and hid them in books. All these aces pinned up on the walls were crazy and those little stars on the ceiling in Mom's bedroom, Karen had to admit this guy seemed to be a real weirdo.

"Well, daughter, what are you thinking about?" asked James.

"You get this right now, creep, I am not your daughter and I never will be. And as to what I am thinking, I am thinking you are really weird, and I think you ought to back up and get out of here right now!"

"Karen, you must learn better manners. I am now your father and you must obey me!"

"In a pig's ass I will," snorted Karen.

James moved toward her and she darted out the door into the garage. She grabbed the machete laying on the work bench and decided to have a little fun. She hid the weapon behind her back and went back into the house, looking for James. Karen found him in the living room and advanced on him wildeyed, showing him the machete, waving it in the air. James got up from the sofa and ran. Karen snickered and followed him, crying "I'll cut you down to size, little man!"

James ran out to the street where he got behind the wheel of his car and drove off.

Karen stood in the kitchen door, laughing, "Run, little man, run as fast as you can!"

James picked Ellen up at the restaurant and drove her home. Ellen was exhausted and she fixed some soup and went straight to bed. She ached all over from using new muscles. She realized it would take a few days to get into shape for this new job. James went to bed with her even though it was early, but another night passed without his touching her.

It was three in the morning when Ellen awoke. She felt wide awake and raring to go. The house was dark and still. James slept soundly at her side. She got up and wandered through the house, finally sitting on the living room sofa and sipped a drink watching the moonlight filtering through the tulip tree. Suddenly she had an idea and she went back to the bedroom and got the rifle. She felt like shooting it – it really had been fun to shoot it the other day and after all, she had paid for it, so why shouldn't she shoot it? She pointed it out the window into the dirt of the garden and pressed the trigger. The shot made a loud explosion in the still of the night and James leaped from the bed as though he had been shot.

Ellen, what in the world are you doing?"

"I just wanted to shoot it, James. I wasn't hurting anything."

"Well, put it away. You will wake the whole neighborhood. You really frightened me!"

"I know, I know, I shouldn't have, but I just felt like firing it. I'm sorry I woke you up."

"I am beginning to think this family I married into is strange," said James. "Now come to bed and let's get some sleep."

The next day Ellen didn't go to work. She ached too much and she felt too tired. Maybe she would do in tomorrow when she felt better. Anyway, the manager really hadn't told her to come back the next day, so maybe she should just wait for him to call her.

It was in the afternoon and she and James were sitting at the kitchen table. Ellen was drinking a glass of red wine and James was reading the paper.

James put the paper down and said, "Ellen, I have told you a few things about me and I intend to tell you more, all in good time, but I feel that it is important that I warn you that I am capable of casting spells. Your daughter is not well behaved and she needs much training. Also you must change some of your ways. Now, I will let you do it on your own accord, or I shall have to put a spell on you to change your behavior."

“Oh, come one, now, James,” said Ellen. “There is nothing wrong with Karen. She is just a high spirited teenager. They are all alike nowadays. You don’t know, because you only have a small son. Just wait until he gets older and you will understand! And as for my behavior, why you married me, so why do you want to change me?”

“I am just warning you, Ellen. After all, I am a gypsy and we know many things.”

Ellen felt irritable. She was getting tired of all this mystery. When was James going to start behaving like a husband and taking care of her? Then she had an idea, “Well, James, there is something I haven’t told you about myself. You see, aren’t the only one with secrets. The truth is, is that I am really a witch. I have turned off my powers for a long time because I was weary of that life, but I can give you a little demonstration if you like. Now don’t get upset, I really am what you call a good witch. I usually and I said ‘usually’ only cast good spells, but I can put a bad spell on you.”

“I don’t believe you, Ellen, you cannot be a witch,” said James, but he looked nervous.

“Oh, so you don’t believe me, huh? Well, you know that I don’t smoke. That is because in another life I was a bad witch and was burned at the stake. In this life I am a good witch, unless I am provoked. I shall give you a little demonstration.” Ellen stated at James. James fidgeted and tried to avoid Ellen’s gaze. Ellen concentrated on James’ stomach.

“Tell me, James, how does your stomach feel?” said Ellen sweetly.

“It, it, it doesn’t feel too good. Please Ellen, take the spell away!”

“Sure, James, you will be all right now. Just don’t doubt me again. Relax, the spell is off.”

“Thank you, Ellen, I feel much better. I believe you and I know you will be a good witch with me.”

Later in the evening, Ellen and James sat watching television, side by side. Ellen had forgotten all about the

afternoon's spell. She was tired and was thinking about going to bed. James got up and went back to the bedroom. Ellen heard the toilet flush and a few minutes later, James appeared. He had his head wrapped in a towel and had pinned one of her dangling earring in the center above his forehead.

Ellen glanced at him in amazement. Idly she wondering why he was wearing the strange get up, but she resolved not to ask. It was probably another part of his heritage, she thought and she turned to concentrate on the movie on the TV screen. Suddenly she felt a burning pain on her left breast. She screamed in fright and pain as James pressed his burning cigarette on her chest.

“Now, I will teach you to be a good wife!”

Chapter XXI

Karen was restless. She had gone over to Steve's house early in the evening after being told to leave her own home by James. She had left, slamming the door, fully intending to get even with that little creep who had married her mother, but would bide her time until she thought of something good. Maybe Steve and his friends would help her by coming over to the house in a group and threatening James until they scared him into leaving, but when she arrived at Steve's she found that he was doped up and in no condition to help her.

Finally after smoking one cigarette after another until she had five butts in the ashtray, she told Steve that she was going back home. He mumbled something at her incoherently. Karen got into the car and drove aimlessly through the residential streets, trying to come up with a good approach for her entrance back into the house. Finally she turned the car around. She could not shake the feeling that something was wrong. She would have to stop worrying about what to say when she got there, but just go and take it as it came. She began to feel a terrible urgency to get home.

Kelly was in his room, watching TV on a small black and white set. He heard his mother cry out so he got up from the bed and went to the door, opening it a crack. He could hear James talking low and his mother seemed to be crying. "What the shit is going on?" he wondered. He slipped into Karen's room and using the extension phone, called his father.

"Hi, Pop, sorry to bother you so late at night, but something strange is going on here."

"That's OK, Kelly," replied Warren, "but there isn't much I can do, your mother is married now. Just what do you think is happening? Is your mother all right?"

"I really don't know, Pop, this whole set up here is really funny. This guy she married talked her into buying a rifle, a 30-30, and I think he just hit her or something because she cried

out, and I know it is probably silly, but what if he gets that rifle and uses it on her. I'm scared, Pop."

"Kelly, calm down, now. Just hang up and call the police. Then I want you to get out of there. Go through the window or something, but get out of there."

"Kelly did as he told, dialing the local police station, where he was told that it would be checked out, then he quietly slipped out the bedroom window, got into his car and drove over to the park where he parked the car and sat, watching the traffic on the street.

At the local police station, a bored desk sergeant hung up the phone. "Hey, Joe, just got a call from that Thompson kid. Said there is something funny going on at this mother's house, thinks she is getting beat up and might get shot. Probably a hoax, you know that Thompson kid. You might cruise by and look at the situation over if you are out of that way."

"Yeah, I'll do that. It's on my route but I agree with you. It's probably nothing or just another domestic disturbance. That household seems to be full of it lately."

Ellen stared at her new husband in amazement. She pressed her hand to her breast, trying to still the pain of the burn. The smell of scorched wool was in the air. "Why did you do that?" she cried, "you know how I feel about fire!"

"I told you, you must learn to be a good wife!"

He grabbed her arm, half raising her to her feet, then with a smashing blow, struck her backhanded across her face, snapping her head back with the impact.

Ellen screamed with pain. She struggled to free herself from his grasp only to be struck again and again. Blood streamed from his nose, staining her sweater. James dragged his wife down the hall into the bedroom and threw her onto the bed. They he reached under the bed and drew out the rifle. Ellen's eyes widened in fright. Slowly he opened the chamber and inserted two shells, then raised it, pointing it directly at Ellen's head.

Ellen was silent. Her face grew more composed and the fright left her swollen eyes. “This is it,” she thought, “I am going to die, and I really don’t even care. Hail, Mary, full of grace, pray for me now in the hour of my death!” She startled at the thought, that she had uttered a portion of a Catholic prayer, for she was not Catholic but at this moment, it flashed into her mind.

Knocking at the front door! Ellen still stared at the rifle, then a voice penetrated her calm.

“Mom! Mom! It’s me, please let me in!”

“Karen! Go away! Run! Run!”

James lifted the two by four bar from the door, opened it and went after Karen. Karen had turned past the second corner of the house when she heard the front door open and she didn’t know which way around the house James would come. The gate at the other side might be locked. She looked at the deck off the patio. It stood several feet off the ground and was roughly ten feet deep. Karen knew there were spiders under there and who knows what else, but it seemed better than James and that rifle so she crawled under. Her heart pounding so loud she was certain he would hear it. She struggled to quiet her labored breathing as James walked by. He searched the back yard quickly then went back into the house. When she heard the front door shut, Karen cautiously crawled out from under the deck, then hoisted herself over the fence. She dropped onto her right knee, and felt stabbing pain shoot up her leg. She checked herself before she could cry out and ignoring the pain, ran across the street to Alma’s house.

“Alma, Alma! Please let me in, it’s Karen!” she cried, beating on the door with her fists.

The door opened by Bobby, Alma’s littlest son. Karen stumbled in and fell, fainting in a disorganized heap on the soft carpet.

James came back into the bedroom to find Ellen on her feet. She stood tall and straight. Her heart was pounding so hard she was certain it must show through her clothing. She had not

heard a shot, or Karen cry out. Karen must have gotten away! Her acceptance, her impending death gone, Ellen looked for an escape, she fought to control any outward sign of her rage at James for threatening Karen.

Setting down the rifle down against the wall, away from Ellen, James reached into his wallet and pulled out a twenty dollar bill. This he handed to Ellen and said, “Here, go and give this to your son and tell him to leave.”

Ellen took the money. “Kelly,” she thought, “why, I don’t think he is even in the house.”

She slowly turned, moving very carefully, out the bedroom door and down the hall. Opening Kelly’s bedroom, she slipped in and closed it softly. Kelly was not there, just as she had thought. Silently, the twenty now crumpled in her fist, she slide open the window. Then she moved a chair over to the window and crawled out dropping onto the narrow deck outside which ran in front of Kelly and Karen’s bedroom windows across the front of the house. In her bare feet, she tiptoed across the ground of her home that she knew so well, opened the gate and without closing it, silently ran across the street to Alma’s house and safety.

Once again Bobby opened the door to admit a tearful, blood smeared Ellen. Karen rose from the kitchen table and rushed into her mother’s arms.

“Mom, Mom, thank God you are OK!”

“Karen, oh, Karen!”

The two women could not seem to let go of each other, tears flowing down their faces. Alma started to cry too from the sight of mother and daughter embracing.

“Bill has called the police,” said Alma. “They should be here soon.”

Shortly after she spoke, the door bell rang and a uniformed policeman stood at the door. The officer listened to the stories told by Ellen and Karen, made notes in his book, then slowly said, “Well, Mrs. Thompson, once again I have to tell you that this is another what we call an domestic disturbance. If your

husband had fired the rifle at you, then we could arrest him for discharging a weapon in the city, but that is about all. I can see that he has beaten you and you can file a complaint, but we cannot remove him from his home and take him to jail. He lives there.” At these words, Ellen started to protest. “Yes, I know what you are going to say, But the fact is, is that you are married to him and therefore this is his home. I would advise you to stay at a motel for the night and then go home in the morning. By then everyone will have calmed down and you can settle your difference, one way or another, either by staying together or by splitting up, that is up to you.”

Ellen nodded her head slowly. She had heard this before from when Jack had beaten her and Karen.

Alma was shocked at what she had heard. She believed Karen and Ellen and urged the to stay with her for the night, but Ellen refused. Ellen could not help but fear for her neighbor’s life and her small children if James should find her and Karen sheltered there. It would be better for all if she and Karen left for the night and then in the morning figured out the next move.

The car was across the street in the driveway. Somehow she would have to get across the street and get the car. Finally Ellen decided that she would make a dash for the car and would pick up Karen as soon as she backed the car out of the driveway. Keeping her eye on the windows of her home, she stole across the street. Carefully, she opened the car door, place the key in the ignition. She pumped the gas pedal and then turned the key. The engine caught. She jammed it into reverse and stepped on the gas hard. The car shot out of the driveway, scraping the rear fender along the Continental owned by James. Karen ran out of the house and jumped into the car and they raced off down the street.

Karen drove the car over to the nearest motel. She waited in the car while Karen went in to register. Karen came out a short time later, going to the driver’s side of the car. “Mom, how much money do you have? They want \$22.50 for a room.”

“I’ve only got the twenty that James gave me to give to Kelly,” replied Ellen. “Do you have any money, Karen?”

“No, I’m sorry, Mom, I only have a dollar kin change. Let’s just stay in the car for the night.”

“No, we can’t do that, let’s go over to Cecelia’s. That is far enough away from the house that James can’t get to us, and then in the morning we will decide what to do next.”

“OK, but I think that I will drop you off at Cecelia’s and I will stay with Laurie. I’ll pick you up in the morning around ten.”

Everything then agreed on, the two drove to Cecelia’s house, stopping once at the liquor store to get a bottle of wine. Ellen was shaking noticeably now and she was feeling nauseated. She knew that she would feel better if she had some wine in her stomach.

Karen went up to Cecelia’s door with her. When Cecelia opened the door, she was startled at the sight before her, a very bedraggled Ellen, a burn hole in her sweater, bruises over her face, supported by a very concerned Karen.

“Cecelia, can I stay with you tonight?” Cecelia nodded. “I have a lot to tell you, Cecelia, a whole lot.”

“Come on in Ellen, I have been worried about you.” Cecelia looked over at Karen. “Don’t worry, Karen, I’ll take good care of her. Come on back in the morning.” Then she turned to her friend and taking the bottle from her grasp, she said, “You won’t be needing that. Come on in and we’ll have a nice long talk and then you can have some valium so you can sleep. But first, let’s get some ice for that nasty bruise!”

An hour later, calmed by the valium safe in her friend’s home, Ellen fell into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter XXII

Ellen woke to sounds from the kitchen. Cecilia was evidently fixing breakfast. She groaned with pain from the bruises on her body when she got out of bed. She groaned again upon seeing her battered face in the mirror. Two black eyes, a swollen nose and very purple cheekbone looked back at her.

Cecilia let out a gasp when she saw her friend at the door to the kitchen. “Oh, Ellen, you poor thing! Come on over and sit down. Would you like some coffee? No? Then how about a glass of milk and a bowl of hot cereal? Good, I think that will set well on your stomach.”

Ellen slowly ate the food set in front of her, then took the valium Cecilia offered her.

“Well, Ellen, I think I have come up with a plan. I have a cousin in the police department of this city and I know that if I ask him to help us with the police in your city, well, I just know that Andy will be a lot of help.”

Ellen nodded her thanks and Cecilia made the phone call to her cousin. A short time later, the phone rang back. Cecilia answered and talked briefly, then hung up and turned to Ellen.

“There, it’s all set. We are to meet the police at your house at 11. They will help you go onto your house and will help you get James out. After all, the house is in your name only, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is. My savings account no longer is, but I’ll worry about that later.” Ellen voice trailed off. “Oh, Cecilia, I have been such a fool.”

“Now, don’t worry about dumb things like that, Ellen. Let’s just get together with the police and get James out of your house. Then you can decide what to do next.”

The door bell rang. Cecilia admitted Karen who ran over to her mother, fresh tears running down her face at the sight of her mother’s battered face.

“I’d like to kill him for what he did to you, Mom.”

“Now, Karen, don’t talk like that. I just want to get out of this mess!”

“I’ll help you, Mom, just tell me what to do.”

“I wish I knew,” answered Ellen sadly.

“Well, we are all going to meet the police at 11 and since it is nearly 1:30 we had better get a move on. Come on, Ellen, I have a sweater you can wear, I think. I washed it and I think it shrunk down to just your size!”

It was eleven o’clock on the dot when the three women arrived at the intersection leading to the block where Ellen lived. Coming from the other direction were two squad cars. They parked side by side next to Ellen’s house and met on the sidewalk to discuss strategy.

“Ladies, we want you to stay right her until we ask you to come in. We don’t want you to get hurt, so stay put.” The officer winced at his choice of words. “God,” he thought, “her face looks like raw hamburger. She must really be hurting and I’m telling her to stay away or she will get hurt.”

Two officers went to the front door and the other two circled the house, going in opposite directions. Guns were drawn, and Ellen noted that they looked very serious. Whatever Cecelia’s cousin had done to convince them, she was very appreciative. There was no answer to the front door. The two officers net in the back yard at the sliding glass door where James saw that he was seen by them and he got up from the sofa and let them in.

In a few minutes, one of the officers came out to the women, “Well, we have looked through the house and don’t see anything. There is no sign of the rifle. Are you certain that he had one? He denies that there is a gun in the house –“

“There sure as hell is a rifle,” blurted out Karen. “That little creep had it pointed right at me and I heard him cock it!”

“Well, why don’t you come on in the house. It is safe as he is just sitting on the sofa, being very quiet. Maybe since you know the house so well, you know where he might have hidden the rifle.”

Ellen and Karen entered their home cautiously. Sure enough, there was James sitting with his legs crossed, looking very calm. Ellen noted that this morning he wasn’t wearing the towel as a

turban. She glanced hastily around the room. Everything seemed to be in place; Karen busily went searching throughout the house, opening closets and drawers and looking under beds.

When Karen came back into the living room, she shook her head. The police shrugged their shoulders, then the officer in charge spoke to Ellen. “Are you positive that this man threatened your life? That he did in fact have a rifle and threatening you with it?”

“Yes, he did,” replied Ellen. “I saw him put a shell into the chamber and he raised it up and pointed it at my head.”

“And he pointed at me and I heard him cock it.” said Karen.

“Well, sir, what do you have to say about these accusations?”

“My poor wife has been drinking. She has a problem that way. And I am afraid that her imagination ran away from her. I wouldn’t harm her. She fell down the patio steps and hurt herself yesterday when she was drunk. I swear that I did not touch her. We are newlyweds and I would not hurt the woman I love. As for her daughter, she is quick tempered and I fear she is very jealous. She believes that I am taking her mother’s love from her, so she is lying to get me to leave.”

“No, he is lying,” cried Ellen.

The two officers spoke briefly aside, then one came over to James and said, “Sir, would you mind getting up for a minute?”

When James rose, the officer pulled the sofa cushions off and there was the rifle. “Well, will you look at that. He was sitting on it,” said the officer in amazement. As he checked the weapon he added, “and it is fully loaded and cocked, ready to fire!”

“Ok, Mr. Wright, you had better come with us. Ma’am, please stay home for the next hour or so. I will send a police woman out to talk with you and get your statement.”

Ellen nodded and watched the officers lead James away. Once again she and Karen hugged each other. Cecelia came kin and smiled at the sight. “I knew Andy would be able to help,” she said.

“Cecelia, thanks so much for all you have done,” said Ellen, “Thanks for believing me and Karen. I was beginning to wonder if we could get any help at all from the police, but you have shown me that they can be a big help after all.”

“Well, I’ll go back home. I know you two want to do quite a few things here. Call me if you want to talk or if I can help in any way.”

“Thanks, Cecelia, you are a wonderful friend.”

Ellen and Karen moved through the house, removing the cards and the little stars and throwing them away. Karen took all of Jame’s clothes from her mother’s closet and threw them into his big car parked in the driveway.

Ellen went in and took a long hot shower. When she got out and dried, she still felt dirty, so once again she turned on the water and stepped back in, scrubbing her whole body fiercely.

Several hours later, the doorbell rang. Karen opened it and admitted two police women. They all sat down at the round kitchen table where once again Ellen and Karen told their stories of the night before. Then Ellen was asked to remove her blouse and photographs were taken of the burn and the bruises.. Karen gasped at the sight of the now purple hand prints on Ellen’s arm.

“What’s going to happen now,” Ellen asked.

“Well, it’s hard to say,” replied one of the officers. “We will submit the photos as evidence of the mishap. The rifle has been confiscated and will be held pending an investigation.”

“But what about James?”

“Mr. Wright is currently down at the holding cell, awaiting transportation to the County Hospital.”

“County Hospital? I don’t understand, he wasn’t hurt,” said Ellen.

“No, he wasn’t. It seems that your husband is an escapee from the Cabrillo State Hospital,” and noting Ellen’s lack of understanding, she continued, “That is a mental hospital. Mr. Wright will be lodged in the mental wing of the County Hospital until he can be assigned to the proper placement.”

“You mean he is a nut?” asked Karen.

“Well, he is an escaped mental patient,” replied the officer.

“How could I have been so foolish,” moaned Ellen, sitting down and holding her head in her hands.

“Just be thankful that you are safe and alive. He is going to be tucked away and you can relax. I would suggest that you see an attorney about your marriage.”

“Oh, my, yes. I must get out of this marriage!” cried Ellen. Then turning to Karen, she said, “Karen, I almost got you killed because I was so stupid to marry that nut!”

“Don’t think about it, Mom. We both have a lot of changes to make in the way we behave. Let’s really try, OK?”

“OK, Karen, let’s try.”

The next day, Ellen looked for her purse. She needed to do some shopping but her purse was nowhere to be found. She did find the three legged chair tucked away in Kelly’s closet. Some of her jewelry was also missing, her alexanderite pendant and ring. She vaguely remembered James telling her once that the red stone were evil. She wondered where he had put them. They were of some value and she hoped he had not thrown them away, perhaps out in the yard where she wouldn’t find them for years. Finally she called the police and asked them if when they had questioned James, he had mentioned anything about her purse or her jewelry. They referred her to the Hospital where she was put in touch with the doctor who was treating James. He advised her to come down and talk with James, assuring her that it was perfectly safe to do so.

Ellen had a drink before leaving for the trip to the hospital. It was her first in two days and burned going down, warming her inside, filling her with a welcome glow. Transferring the fuses in the old car, she made the trip down to the hospital.

The County Hospital was large and bewildering, but at least she found the mental ward and talked briefly with the doctor in charge.

“Mrs. Wright, I assure you that James is quite safe. He is on medication and is not considered dangerous. So long as he takes medication he will behave quite normally. His old records from

Cabrillo identify him as a paranoid. You can talk to him quite safely. Just speak calmly to him and perhaps he will be able to tell you what he did with your things.”

“Well,” thought Ellen as she followed a nurse down a long corridor and through several locked doors, “I always thought paranoia meant being afraid of things and I don’t think James was afraid of people.”

Then suddenly she was face to face with James. She turned around for the nurse, but she had left Ellen’s side and was already completely across the room. Ellen felt paranoid herself.

James smiled at her. “Ellen, my wife, it is so good of you to come see me. Soon I will be out of there and as I am nearly well and we can continue our life together.”

Ellen shuddered. “James, please, you must help me. I cannot find my purse. Also my jewelry is gone. Do you know where they are?”

“Why of course, my little wife. I was afraid that Karen would steal from you, so I placed your purse out of sight. It is behind the towels in the kitchen drawer. Are you short of money? Here, let me give you some!” He pulled out his wallet and on opening it, removed four bills and gave them to Ellen.

Ellen took the money and murmured “Thank you” and slowly backed away from James. Then she turned and went to the door where she was released and the door locked behind her.

She turned and looked at the money in her hands. Four twenties and she could bet they were all from her purse for James had never had any money of his own except for a few dollars when she met him.

When she got home, she checked the towel drawer and there was the missing purse. Credit cards and drivers license were still intact but it was devoid of money. Now she knew that the twenties James had given her were her own.

She went to the phone book and under the yellow pages, selected an attorneys name at random. Then she dialed the number and told the girl that answered, “I want to see about getting a divorce.”

Chapter 23

John Spencer got up when Ellen entered his office. He escorted her to a chair, then sat down himself in a large leather chair behind his desk. His eyes narrowed as Ellen told her story and he made numerous notes on a yellow lined pad. When Ellen had finished, he leaned forward and spoke seriously, "I believe Mrs. Wright," and he noted that Ellen winced at the name, "that the first thing we must do is to get a court order restraining Mr. Wright from entering your home and an order to get him to return your personal property. Then as soon as we can, we will get the annulment."

Ellen breathed a sigh of relief. She had feared that she would have to get a divorce as she had from Warren. An annulment sounded so much better, as though there had never been a marriage.

"It will take a month or so for the annulment, but we can go up in a week or so and get the restraining order. I know it sounds bad for you, but your legal name is still Ellen Wright until we get the annulment," and then noting Ellen's dismay, he added, "but you can use your old name except for signing legal documents."

"But what about my saving account? It is in both names and takes both signature to get any money out."

"If you will get a bank card, signature card that is, then I will arrange to have either James sign it releasing his interest, or his conservator will sign it. I shall have to speak to his doctor about that. But don't worry about that right now. I'll call you in a day or two and let you know the court date for the restraining order."

Secretly he hoped that he could get into the court before the bruises faded but from the looks of them, it would be quite a while before they left Ellen's face. He noted that her face had a yellowing cast to it and her hands shook visibly. Was that alcohol her smelled? He hoped she would hold herself together for the court date.

When Ellen got home, she saw that someone had moved the big Continental out to the street. “That will be a help,” she thought, “at least I won’t have to state at it all the time.”

She went back to her bedroom and finding her bottle, she poured about three inches of vodka into a glass. She was heading back with it to the kitchen when she heard the doorbell ring. There was some scrambling in Karen’s room. Then she heard the sound of the trapdoor in Karen’s closet being opened. The trapdoor was the access to under the house and the kids had often played under there. She thought it was odd, but went to answer the door, now on its second ring.

Two men in business suits stood at the door. Ellen was startled and then even more so when they presented their badges and asked if they could come in. Karen came down the hall as Ellen led the two men into the living room.

“Karen, these men are from the FBI. They want to ask us some questions about James.”

“Oh, OK,” said Karen and the four sat down.

“Well, Mrs. Thompson, we really want to know the whereabouts of a certain James A. Wright.”

Karen started to giggle. “That’s easy,” she said. “He is locked up at the County Nut House – for trying to kill my mother and me!”

“Well, I guess that explains those bruises, ma’am,” said one of the men.

The other then spoke up, “We don’t want to take up too much of your time. We would just like some background information about this guy and if you knew what he was doing the night of November 12th.”

“I’ll tell you everything we know about him, but it really isn’t much, but what has he done?” asked Ellen.

“He made a phone call to our office in Chicago and made a statement that he was going to kill the next president of the United States. We suspected that this was just a crank call, but when a threat is made of that caliber, we have to check it out.

The call was made from a phone in this house, 398 6617, so that is why we are here.”

Ellen and Karen quickly told the FBI agents all that they knew about James, including giving the his new address. They questioned Ellen briefly about Jame’s aunt in Oakland, but Ellen was unable to remember her name or her address and she had to admit that while James and his aunt had spoken a foreign language, she had no idea what language it was. She felt helpless that she was unable to give out any helpful information. She realized that she knew very little about this man she had so blithely married.

When the agents left, Karen collapsed on the sofa. “Karen, what is going on?” asked Ellen.

“Oh, Mom, it is just that Steve is in a little trouble with the law and when the FBI came to the door, we thought they were coming after him, so he hid under the house. It’s nothing Mom, but what with all this about James, I really am scared to be in this house and I need Steve here.”

“I know what you mean, Karen, but what sort of trouble is Steve in? What can we do to help?”

“He’s wanted in connection with an armed robbery. Now, don’t get excited, Mom, it wasn’t Steve, just some friends of his, but the cops want him to be in jail until the trial next month and he doesn’t have any money for the bond and he just can’t stay in jail now, I couldn’t bear it!” Karen was crying openly.

“Don’t cry, Karen, we’ll figure something out,” said Ellen. “Ask Steve to come out from under the house and let’s talk this over.”

A short time later, Steve emerged from the dark hole and they all sat down at the kitchen table. Steve and Karen smoked one cigarette after another as they talked and Ellen sipped her drink, getting up twice and replenishing it.

“Well, I can see that the main problem is money,” said Ellen. “We need money to post bond so Steve can stay our of jail and act as protection for us. I believe what you say, Steve, and I know that when you go to trial, it will go in your favor.” Steve

nodded his appreciation. He was amazed that Karen's mother would care about him and his problems. "Where are the other kids that are accused? Are they in jail, or have they posted bond?"

"Well," Steve replied, "Charlie's folks had the money to get him out and Jerry's family put up their house as bond."

"Well, then that is what I will do too!"

"Oh, Mrs. Thompson, I can't ask you to do that!" said Steve.

"Well, I'm going to. But I want your solemn promise that you will show up for the trial. I'm doing this because we need you badly right now, Steve. We need you to be in the house in case James should come back."

"But mom, he is locked up, they aren't going to let him out, are they?" asked Karen.

"Probably not, Karen, it is just that feel so nervouse that I want a man around here."

"Well, you can bet that he won't dare try anything with me here." said Steve.

"If you kids will excuse me, I feel awfully tired. Think I will go lie down for a while."

"Sure Mom, have a nice rest," said Karen. After Ellen had left the room and Karen heard her mother's bedroom door close, she spoke to Steve, "You know, I am really worried about Mom. She has been through so much, but her drinking got her into this last mess and she is looking just terrible lately. There has to be something I can do for her. Something to get her over being like this and back to being my Mom again."

The following day, Ellen got three phone calls. The first was form her attorney informing her of her court date for the restraining order. "Ellen, this is John Spencer, just wanted to let you know that the date is set for December 1st. How are the bruises?"

"Just awful, John, they don't seem to be going away at all and I think they look worse," said Ellen.

"Well, it's too bad that they look so bad and yet it is good that they do. It will help your case considerably. Please don't

wear any makeup to conceal them when you come to court, now promise me that!”

“OK, I promise,” replied Ellen, “and thank you, John, for your help.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” answered her attorney.

The next call was from Detective Johnson. “Hi, Mrs. Thompson, just wanted to let you know that James Wright has been moved from the County Hospital and is now in a different facility.”

“Oh, my God,” said Ellen, “Where is he?”

“Don’t worry, he is perfectly safe. He has calmed down completely and the doctors say that he is perfectly safe. He has been placed in a less strict building, but is still under medical supervision. It is more homelike environment.”

Ellen shuddered, “Can he get out?”

“No, there is a wall around the place and plenty of personnel on duty. Of course, if he were considered dangerous, he wouldn’t be placed there, so I guess it is possible that he could get out. But don’t worry, he is taking his medication and I have been assured that he holds no ill feelings against you or Karen. I’m sure he won’t bother you anymore.”

“well, I’m not sure and I don’t like the idea of a more relaxed environment,” said Ellen.

“I’m sure you will be OK. Oh, incidentally, anytime you want you can come down and pick up your rifle.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that as soon as I can,” replied Ellen.

The next call was from the officer in charge of Steve’s case and Ellen learned that she could come down as soon as possible and put up her house as collateral for Steve’s bond. She had Karen drive her down to the courthouse where she shakily signed the papers. Her mind was in a blur and she could barely remember her act of signing away her property a short time later. She went to bed immediately when she got home.

Chapter XXIV

Ellen developed a pattern in the days following the phone calls. She drank until she grew sleepy, then she slept a dreamless sleep awoke to nausea and shakes, drank to stop the sickness, grew sleepy once again. She rarely ate. When she ran out of money, she stole it from Karen's purse. She could no longer afford vodka, but only the cheapest wine, and with no food she could exist on half a gallon of wine a day. Several times she woke to find that she had wet the bed, so she moved over to a dry spot and slept again. Quite a few times she couldn't make it to the bathroom when she did wake up and so her floor became stained with urine and feces and the bile that she coughed up when she had an attack of the dry heaves. Her only companion was her black cat Mouse. Mouse stayed nearby and watched her mistress, curling up next to her and sleeping as her mistress slept. Ellen's day started with her morning trip to the convenience store where she lined up with the rest of the winos and got her daily supply. She even turned her precious silver dollars she had collected for wine, being two dollars worth of wine for every silver dollar by a grateful clerk. She had to stop in the orchard and drink some of the wine in order to have the energy to get back over the fence. She would struggle over, falling in a heap, then get to her feet and climb into her bedroom window, finally collapsing in a sweat either on the rug or the bedclothes in a disorderly pile on the floor.

The day before Thanksgiving, Karen brought home a turkey and some canned pumpkin. She roused her mother from her bed and talked her into coming into the kitchen.

"OK Mom, everything is here for dinner. What do we do first?"

"How can it be Thanksgiving," mumbled Ellen, "where did the time go?"

"Never mind, Mom, just tell me how to do this."

"Well, first you have to make the pie. I'll make the crust for you."

“How can it be Thanksgiving,” mumbled Ellen, “where did the time go?”

“Never mind, Mom, just tell me how to do it.”

“Well, first you have to make the pie. I’ll make the crust for you.”

Ellen tried to make a piecrust but everything seemed to go wrong. She finally threw the mess into the sink and turning to Karen she said, “I have to go to the bathroom, be right back.”

She went to the bathroom, poured herself another drink and when she got back to the kitchen, Karen took one look at her now completely drunk mother and led her back to bed.

Karen took down a cookbook and spent the next four hours trying to fix a holiday dinner. When she had the dinner ready, she called Steve from in front of the TV and again got her mother up from bed.

Ellen sat down at the table, completely unaware of what she was doing. She took a few bites of the turkey, but the chewing seemed to be so difficult. She leaned in the table, trying to see with runny eyes. Finally after half an hour, Karen and Steve took Ellen back to her bed. Karen was appalled at the stench in her mother’s bedroom and she shut the door against the odor.

“Steve, I have to do something with Mom. She is dying!”

“I know, Karen, she is really bad. I’ll ask around and see what I can find out from the street as to where the drunks go for help.”

That evening after the dishes were cleared away, Karen joined Steve in front of the TV. When the commercial came on she started to get up to get a coke when she heard the word alcoholic and she turned to listen.

“And so if you or one of your loved ones has a problem with alcohol, give us a call. It may be the most important call you can make.” A phone number followed, flashed on the screen. Karen ran for a pencil and paper, telling Steve to remember the number.

Karen’s hands shook as she dialed the number. She told the woman’s voice on the other end about her mother, what she was

doing and how she looked. The woman explained about the care center where it was and spoke of medical insurance covering the cost, only requiring a down payment of \$500 as a deposit.

“It does have to be voluntary,” the woman explained, “so you will have to get your mother to agree to come in.

Sometimes you can get an alcoholic to accept treatment by promising them a bottle to go. She will have to sign and admittance form when she gets here, so it is a good idea to convince her that she really needs help.”

“I’ll do it,” said Karen. “Some what or other, I’ll do it!”

The next few days Karen worked on her mother, telling her about the alcoholic hospital, how they would make her well again and finally Ellen relented, saying that she would go, but only after she had been to court for the restraining order and she was sure that Karen would be safe.

Next Karen had to find the \$500. The only place she could go was to Warren. To her surprise, Warren agreed immediately. He knew that Ellen’s insurance would cover the hospitalization and eventually he would get his money back and he rationalized that even if he didn’t then he had done his best to help his former wife. He also called the care center and listened carefully to what they had to say. Then he drove up there and looked the place over, coming away satisfied that Ellen would get good care at the facility.

On the date of the hearing for the restraining order, Karen got her mother up, saw that she showered and dressed, forced her to eat a small bowl of cereal, then drove her to the courthouse.

“Your case should be next, Ellen, how do you feel?”

“I’m OK, John. I just want to get this over with.”

John patted Ellen on her hand, noting that Karen was holding her mother’s other hand in a tight grip.

The case was called and Ellen was sworn in. Her responses were slow and guarded, her voice shaky as she told her story to the judge. Sympathetic murmurs rose from the spectators in the

room John helped Ellen down from the stand as the judge banged his gavel.

“Come on, Ellen, it’s all over. We have the restraining order.”

“I want to go home,” said Ellen.

“OK, Mom, I’ll take you home now.” Karen took her mother’s arm and led her from the courtroom, smiling her thanks at her mother’s attorney.

“OK, Mom, that is over with. Now will you check into the care center?”

“Just give me another day, Karen, just another day.”

“Bu Mom, you promised!”

“Just another day, Karen, one more day.”

The next day Ellen woke to the sun. She was late for getting her wine. There was something she was supposed to do today and she couldn’t remember what it was. She struggled to her feet, dressing in a torn pair of jeans, torn from many trips over the fence. She felt so weak and shaky and she frantically searched for her bottle. It was empty. So were all the others scattered around the room. She dug behind the clock radio, behind the books on the shelves – nothing. She sat on the bed exhausted from her exertions, sweating from the search for booze. Gradually her racing heart slowed and she got to her feet. Her knees felt so weak. She knew she could not make it over the fence. She would have to go out the door and down the street in front of all the neighbors. She had to get a bottle or she would die.

The house was empty as Ellen moved slowly through. Karen’s car was gone from the garage. The Continental still sat in the street. Ellen moved slowly and purposely down the street, working hard on walking in a straight line and now weaving. At last she made it to the store and her bottle. The saliva in her mouth ran as she thought of the bottle clutched in her arms. She ducked into the restroom of the gas station, pulled the bottle from the bag. The top wouldn’t come off. She struggled and sweated and finally succeeded in removing the twist off cap. Raising the bottle to her mouth, she drank. Bile raised in her

throat and she had to put the bottle down and fight the nausea – swallowing until the sickness subsided. Then another swallow and gradually she felt better. She straightened up and walked as a steady as she could form the rest room.

As she passed a house on her street, nearing her goal, a neighbor came out to sweep her porch.

“Hi, Ellen, haven’t seen you for a long time: Are you on vacation?”

“Oh hi, Diane. Yes, I’m on vacation.”

“Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee?”

“Thanks, but not right now, have some things to do at home, maybe some other time.”

“Sure, Ellen. Say, if ever you want to come over and just talk or anything, please come. I would really like to help you.”

“Thanks Diane, I’ll remember that,” replied Ellen, wondering to herself as to why Diane mentioned help. Then she brushed it out of her mind. “Got to get home,” she thought. Got to get home with this bottle!”

She reached the door, fumbling for her key, leaning on the door as she worked the key. The door opened from her weight and she fell in a heap on the kitchen floor. “Shit,” she thought, “probably get more bruises.”

Mom, Mom, come one, get up. Pop is here.”

Ellen woke to see Karen bending over her. “Why is your father here? What does he want?” she asked.

“Just come on, Mom.”

“OK, Karen, I’m coming. Let me comb my hair.”

Warren was shocked at Ellen’s appearance. Her eyes were watery and her face was disaster from the bruises, now all shades of yellow and purple.

“Well, Ellen, I brought some hamburgers. Why don’t you sit and eat with us?”

Ellen sat and looked at the food in front of her. It smelled awful, but to keep up appearances, she tried to eat. At last she put it down. “Thanks, Warren, but I guess I am just not hungry.”

“Well, then, are you ready to go?”

“Go? Go where?”

“Mom, you promised. You promised you would go and Pop is here to take you.”

“Well, if I promised, then I will go. I always keep my promises, or at least I try to,” her voice trailed off. “I’ll just go and brush my teeth.”

Ellen returned to the bedroom and finding her bottle took several swigs from it, then a few more. She brushed her teeth and combed her hair once more.

When she got back to the kitchen, Warren rose and took her arm, guiding her through the door, helping her into his car.

“Bye, Mom, see you soon,” called Karen.

“I don’t understanding,” mumbled Ellen.

The care center was some fifteen miles away and the comfort of the car and the sound of the motor lulled Ellen off to sleep again.

When they arrived at the care center, Warren helped Ellen out of the car. She was mumbling something, but he couldn’t understand it. A nurse came out and assisted Warren, taking them into a examining room where she took Ellen’s blood pressure and listened to her chest. An aide came in with some forms which Warren signed.

The aide spoke, “We have to get her signature on this one.”

They put the pen in Ellen’s hand and asked her to sign her name. She tried to oblige, but just an illegible scrawl was achieved.

“How old did you say she is?” asked the nurse.

“She’s 42,” replied Warren.

“She looks as though she is 62!” said the aide.

“That should do it, Mr. Thompson,” said the nurse. “We’ll take care of her from here. Thank you for bringing her in. You can see her after she has been here for 48 hours, but we insist that there be no outside contact for that period. Don’t worry, she will have the best care.”

Warren nodded, took one last look at his former wife and walked out the door.

Chapter XXV

Stretching out her leg, her foot touched the curve of the bottle. Her toes traced the outline, reassuring her that it was truly there. She raised her body up shakily and reached for it. But it wasn't there! How could that be? Her foot told her it was there, but her hand could not find it. Maybe it has slipped further down, was now nestled at the bottom of the bed. She could not find it even though she searched every inch of the bed. The she gradually became aware of her surrounding. The light from the window was from a different direction. The room had different shadows that her familiar bedroom. The bed was narrow and there were slats on the side. She felt a sinking sensation and then she realized that she was in another hospital. Dammit, Karen must have done it to her again. At the thought of Karen, tears started up in her eyes. She sank down on the pillow and closed her eyes, but she couldn't stop the tears now rolling down on the pillow and closed her eyes, but she couldn't stop the tears now rolling down into her ears. What a mess she had made of thing. Karen, her own daughter, had nearly been killed as a result of what she, Ellen, had done. She didn't care about herself, what difference did it make what happened to her; but Karen, her own daughter, she had put her into terrible danger, Well, that was what alcohol had done to her. Made a complete fool of her and made her a danger to others. All desire for the bottle left her and she resolved to herself that she would never drink again. She would beat this thing. She would get well and get back home, home to take proper care of Karen.

She heard a bell ring. Footsteps out in the hall. A groan came from within the room and in the early dawn light, she made out another bed, one like hers but without slats on it. The groan came again, then a body rose from the bed, walked off a ways and in a few minutes, Ellen heard the sound of a toilet flushing. The shape came back into the room, then came over to Ellen's bed. Ellen saw a blonde woman, tousled from sleep.

"Hi," she said, "glad I have a roomie. How do you feel?"

“Not too bad,” replied Ellen.

“Well, you’ll feel lots better in a day or two. By the way, my name is Betty. My stay here is almost done, only a few more days left, then it’s back home to pick up the pieces!”

“My name is Ellen – just what is this place?”

“Guess you don’t remember much about last night, huh? Well, this is an alcoholic hospital. They call it the Care Center with the emphasis on care and caring. They get your body well again after all the booze and they have classes to change your thinking. It’s all pretty good and it has helped me a lot.”

“Change your thinking?” snorted Ellen, “Well, they’r not going to brainwash me. I am not going to drink anymore. I made too much of a mess out of my life from drinking.”

“Yeah, that is what we all say, and we all hope we won’t too. Say, you had better get up. That is one of the rules. You must get up and appear for every meal and class.”

Ellen sat up and the room spun. “I don’t think I can get up,” she said.

“I’ll go get someone for you,” said Betty and she was gone out the door.

A few minutes later a young man came in with a tray. He smiled at Ellen and as he put the tray down by her bed, “Come on, Babe, let’s try to get up. Pretty dizzy, huh” The nurse will be in a minute with a shot for you, just to help with the shakes. How about trying to eat a little something. Got some hot cereal and some milk. That ought to set OK on your stomach. My, my, someone sure did a trip on your face.”

Ellen ate a little cereal, then drank some milk. The nurse showed up with a needle and gave her the shot and a lecture. “You will have to get up and get moving around. No staying in bed around here,” she said, “so let’s get moving!”

“I’ll help you, Babe,” said the young man, and when Ellen protested about his dressing her he added, “Hey, I’m just like a nurse or a doctor. I’m just trying to help.”

A few minutes later, dressed in her old torn clothes from the day before, Ellen was helped out her room and down the hell to

another room where a class was just starting. Even with help, Ellen had to hold onto the side of the wall for support to keep her knees from buckling. A middle aged man was standing at one end of the room and as Ellen and the young aide entered he called out, “Welcome, Ellen isn’t it” Come on in and sit anywhere. Glad to have you with us whether you are glad or not. We are going to help change your way of thinking.”

“No, you’re not,” thought Ellen. “I am be dumb enough to be a drunk, but you’re not going to brainwash me.”

“Ellen, why don’t you start this session off with your story. Tell us what happened to you. Don’t be nervous as we are your family now and you will soon get to know each of us very intimately.”

Ellen told her story in a monotone and when she was finished, there was silence. She was surprised. She had expected some sounds of shock or horror, but there was none.

A man on the far side of the room started telling his story of his wife running off with his best friend, his drinking and his car accident. How he was told to get sober or loose his job and that was why he was there.

The class was two hours long and Ellen’s head was spinning at its conclusion. Betty came over and helped her get to her feet. The two walked back to their room, Betty walking slowly and keeping a firm grip on Ellen’s arm.

“It’s not so bad, Ellen. You are confused because you are so sick. In a few days when you are feeling better, you’ll settle in and grow to love all the people here.”

When they got back to the room they shared, Ellen found her suitcase, filled with some clothes and personal items. When she asked, she was told what it was dropped off by her family. She was also told that she could have no contact with her family or the outside for 48 hours and the final blow she learned was that she was to stay at the Center for 30 days. She laid down on her bed and cried. She felt trapped but she knew she was here because of misbehavior and so she must stay. Her guilt overwhelmed her and she could not stop crying. Betty finally

sough out the nurse and Ellen was given another shot after which she fell into a gulping, sobbing sleep, much like a baby.

The next morning Ellen felt a little better and she made it into the dining room for breakfast. The effort tired her so that she found it hard to eat anything. Then she was taken to class again to face a different instructor who spent the two hours screaming at people, tearing them down, making them dry. Ellen shivered at the scene around her and then it was her turn.

“And you, Ellen, why are you here?”

“Because I got into trouble from drinking too much.”

“And is that the only reason? Don’t you think that maybe your family got tired of your drunkenness and pushed you out of the your own home?”

“No, I don’t. They brought me here because I was sick.”

“Well, let me tell you, everyone, that the chances of all of you recovering from this disease we call alcoholism are rare. In fact 75% of you will not make it. 75% of you are going to go out there and drink again and make fools of yourselves again and you, Ellen Thompson, are going to be one of that 75%!”

Ellen looked at him stonily. She knew that her track record was bad. How many times this very year had someone tried to help her and she had failed them.

“Do you hear me, Ellen?”

Ellen refused to answer or to show any emotion on her face.

The next day Betty left for home, hugging Ellen and wishing her well, then she was gone. In the afternoon, a police car drove up. A uniformed officer escorted a young woman to the office and half an hour later, Ellen had a new roommate.

Carrie, it turned out, was given a choice of either spending six months in jail for habitual drunkenness or spending 30 days at the Care Center. She had chosen the Care Center.

Ellen resented Carrie from the start. She had come in sober, not sick as Ellen had been. Carrie had a chip on her shoulder and complained about everything. Ellen bit her tongue and resolved to get along with this difficult person. After all, it would only be 30 days and she could stand anything for 30 days.

The next day Ellen had an appointment with the staff psychologist. Dr. Martin was a plump man with a small mustache. He talked with Ellen for an hour, questioning her on her thoughts and feelings, asking her to explain to him how she happened to drink too much. Ellen told him about the fight with Jack, about the car accidents, meeting James in the bar and what followed, but she did not tell him about Kelly. She found she could not speak of it even to a doctor who there to help her solve her problems and so she remained silent.

At the end of the hour, Dr. Martin rose and indicated that she was to leave. As Ellen rose and turned for the door, he spoke, “Ellen, I feel that you will not be helped by the Center, that you will go out and drink again. You haven’t suffered enough, but that you seem to be untouched by your experiences except for the bruises you still carry. I’d be willing to bet that you still need to go out there and drink some more.”

Ellen did not turn, but went through the door, carefully shutting it behind her. Her eyes glistened with tears, but she fought them back. Anger flooded over her and she thought, “A lot you know, you fat ass bastard.”

Chapter XXVI

The 48 hours had passed and Ellen was allowed to use the phone. She looked at the calendar and realized with a shock that it was December. At least that was the page that was showing. What had happened to the rest of November? Why she couldn't even remember Thanksgiving. Warren was in her mind for some reason. Had he brought her here? She vaguely remembered having a hamburger with him and then going back and getting a couple of swigs of wine in her bedroom, but try as she would, she could not remember past that last drink. She asked the nurse what day it was and was told it was December 5th. Why, it was Warren's birthday.

"Warren, it's Ellen, I just called to wish you a Happy Birthday and to thank you. It was you that brought me up here, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was. How do you feel?"

"Pretty good. I don't like here and want to leave, but I will stay. And Warren, I'm not going to drink anymore."

"Hey, that's great, Ellen."

"You know, Warren, I feel so different. It is hard to explain but I feel different that I did."

"That sounds so good, Ellen. Say, is there anything I can bring you?"

"No, I don't think so. I am going to call Karen and get her to bring me some clothes and maybe some yarn so I can knit or something. Anyway, thanks Warren, and have a happy birthday."

"Thank you, Ellen. Hope to see you soon."

"Bye, Warren."

Ellen put another dime into the phone and called home. Karen answered on the second ring.

"Karen, It's me, Mom."

"Mom, it's so good to hear from you. When can I come up to see you? Are you OK? Do you like it there?" Karen's voice went on filled with a hundred questions.

“Karen, not so much so fast! I sure miss you. Are you all right? Nothing funny going on?”

“No, Mom, everything’s OK; Steve is with me all the time and I’m making sure that Mouse gets fed. She misses you. She keep going to your bedroom and meowing.”

“Good old Mouse,” said Ellen. “Karen, do you think you could come up here and bring me a few things? A little make up and bring me some yarn and crochet hooks so I can play with things.”

“Sure, Mom, I’ll be up tomorrow. See you soon.”

“I love you, Karen.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

The next day Karen showed up bringing grocery bags stuffed with things she thought her mother might want. Ellen was grateful to get some different clothes and immediately put on a skirt and sweater.

“Sorry I couldn’t bring you any pants Mom, but they were all torn.”

“That’s OK, Karen. I’ll just wear skirts from now on.”

“Oh, Mom, guess who called?”

“Oh, no, it wasn’t James!”

No, it was Lloyd. I told him what had happened and where you were. He wants to come up to see you. He’s going to call me back tonight, so can I tell him it is OK?”

“Sure, Karen. It’s OK. Now, let’s see what we can do about some of these bills and letters you brought.”

They sat down and Ellen got out her checkbook, but when she tried to write the checks, her handwriting was illegible and after tearing up two checks in frustration, she had to ask Karen to write them out. She started to cry when she realized that she had difficulty even writing her own name, but she checked herself and bit her lip and scrawled her name.

“Mom, it’s OK. You look so much better that you did. Your writing will come back, please Mom, don’t feel so bad.”

“I’m OK, Karen. And I am not going to cry anymore. I’m tired of crying and feeling sorry for myself. That is over,” she said emphatically.

That evening when Ellen was sitting in her room alone, a knock came at her door. Going to the door, she opened it. Lloyd stood in the doorway.

“Can I come in, Ellen?” he asked.

“Of course, come on in. It’s not much, but it’s home for the next 27 days. It’s nice of you to come up to see me.”

“Ellen, I’m sorry, sorry about all that happened to you. You poor thing, your poor face. Does it hurt?”

“Not anymore, just looks kind of nasty yet.”

“Ellen, I care for you so much. I love you, you know, and when I saw you with that man, why I just couldn’t believe it. What did you ever see in him?”

“He told me he would take care of me. It was as simple as that, and I was pretty sick.”

“But there were lots of people who wanted to help you, Ellen, I just don’t see why you did all those crazy things.”

“We drunks do a lot of crazy things. But let’s not talk about that, tell me, what is going on at work? Do you think that I can have my old job back?”

“Well, Dick said you were on sick leave, but I doubt if you can come back to that office. You will probably be transferred to the other branch.”

“Anything will be all right, I just need to get back to work and get some money coming in again.”

“Ellen, I’ve missed you so. I love you and I need you. Hurry up and get well so we can be together again like old times.”

Lloyd and Ellen kissed with a passion with Ellen had not felt in a long time. Suddenly the door burst open and Carrie came in.

“Sorry,” she said. “Oh, Ellen, I’m sorry, but anyway, your friend will have to leave. It’s AA time! Unless of course he wants to stay for that lovely hour!”

“I’ll leave, Ellen, Have to get back anyway. I’ll see you soon.”

Ellen waved goodbye to Lloyd and followed Carrie into the dining hall where the tables were pushed back and the chairs were set up in rows. A podium was placed up front and a small table with books and pamphlets arranged on it was nearby. Most of the patients were already seated and chatting among themselves. Several strangers filed in, some very well dressed and others wearing casual clothes. A young man went up to the podium, pounded a gavel and said, "Hi, this is the Sunday night meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. My name is Bob and I am an alcoholic."

"Hi, Bob," chorused the audience.

Ellen looked around the room. These people didn't look like drunks, they looked just like anybody you might meet on the street. Her conception of a drunk was the passed out bum in the corner of a doorway, not these well dressed people.

Ellen listened to the speeches that night. She listened and realized that she was not alone with her affliction, that others had trod the same path as she and had made it back into the world as respectable citizens again. She felt a surge of hope and vowed to herself that she would do it too.

The next day Ellen was called to the phone. "Ellen," said Lloyd, "I'm afraid I have bad news."

"Oh my God," exclaimed Ellen, "what has happened?"

"I must have dropped my wallet outside when I left you last night and someone picked it up and called my house. Well, they talked with Olivia, because of course I was at work, and now she knows that I was up here. I had to tell her that I was visiting you and what kind of hospital it was. She is very angry at me and it threatening all sorts of things."

"But Lloyd, them maybe she will give you a divorce and we can be married!"

"Oh, Ellen, I can't get a divorce. I could not leave my children. And I could not afford to support two houses. Can't you see that if I left my children, they would have less, that I could not give them as much as I can now. They should grow up in a home with a mother and a father."

“But isn’t it a farce for them to grow up in an unloving environment?” After all, my kids have survived a single parent home.”

“Yes, and look at what a mess they are in. I don’t want my kids to act like yours, Ellen.”

“How can you say that about my kids?” And what about us?”

“We’ll just have to bide our time until Olivia calms down. Then we can go back as before. Give her a couple of weeks, then I can see you again, and by then you will probably be home and I can come over to see you, like before.”

“Why don’t we just forget it, Lloyd. I really don’t want to live that kind of life again. I don’t want to spend hours waiting for the phone to ring, afraid to go out for fear that I will miss your call. Besides, when you do come over, it is for half an hour and then you are gone again, leaving me to wait once more. No, I don’t want to do that again.”

“Then, I’m sorry, Ellen. I cannot divorce Olivia and give up kids.”

“I’m sorry too, Lloyd. Goodbye.”

Ellen hung up the phone. Oddly enough she felt no remorse, it was as though what had happened was inevitable. She shrugged her shoulders and went in to lunch.

A week went by. Ellen adjusted to the routine easily. She remained quiet and separate from the others. She tried to keep a distance between herself and Carrie, but the other woman followed her and sat next to her at each class and meal. Gradually Carrie antagonized each patient until no one would associate with her. Ellen refused to argue with her, so Carrie considered her her only friend. One evening after dinner everyone was occupied and Carrie could find no one to fight with. A group was playing Scrabble, another group was playing gin. The rest of the patients were either watching TV or reading. Finally in desperation, Carrie started to pick on Rosemary, who was confined to a wheelchair, the results of brain damage from drinking perfume. Rosemary had been a dancing instructor but now her limb shook so badly that she could not walk. Carrie

tried to goad Rosemary into an argument but the poor girl could not respond quick enough into an argument but the poor girl could not respond quick enough to Carrie's taunts and she ended up crying piteously.

"Come on, Carrie, leave Rosemary alone," said Ellen.

"What's it to you, Ellen, I'm just trying to get dummy here to talk to me. I'm not hurting her – besides, she doesn't understand anything I say!"

"How do you know? I think Rosemary understands a lot. Anyway it's not fair to pick on her. Why don't you pick on someone your own size?"

"And do you fit the bill, Roomie" I thought you were my friend, but I can see that you are going to shut me out and take everyone else's side against me. You are all against me! You all hate me! Even perfect little Ellen hates me!"

"I don't hate you, Carrie. I just don't like the way you are picking on Rosemary!"

"I'm not picking on her! I am just trying to talk to her! You are picking on me! I'll fix you, you lying sneaking bitch!"

Carrie ran for the kitchen, went through the swing doors and grabbing a knife, she returned with upraised in her hand, advancing on Ellen. "I'll get you for pretending to be my friend!" she screamed.

Ellen backed up, her eyes wide with horror. One of the orderlies suddenly grabbed Carrie from behind and knocked the knife out of her hand.

"Now, now, Carrie, mustn't use bad knives," he said.

Ellen turned and walked as calmly as she could to the nurse's station. Outwardly she appeared calm, but inwardly she was seething. "I want my room changed," she said. "There is an empty bed in June's room. I want to be moved in with June."

"Now Ellen, don't be upset. You are the only one that can get along with Carrie. We can't leave her alone at night and you and she are friends."

"But she just drew a knife on me! You know she picks on everyone and now she is picking on me! What about my safety

while I am a patient here? I didn't go through all that on the outside to come here and ,irdered!" Ellen voice was no longer calm.

"You are not going to move, Ellen. You will just have to get along with Carrie. Why don't you go back in there and make up with her? You will see that everything will be all right. Now go on and leave me alone. I have a lot of work to do. I am not going to get involved with the patients little fights."

As Ellen walked away, she was met by the young orderly who has taken the knife away from Carrie. "Ellen, it's OK. Carrie says she is sorry. She just flares up, but she will be OK now. I'm sure she wouldn't really hurt you. She just likes the attention she gets when she gets someone upset. If you ignore her, she will leave you alone."

"I guess there is nothing else I can do," said Ellen and she walked on down the hall to her room. Going on into the room, she decided to take a shower and wash her hair in the process. The shower was a small stall shower with barely enough room enough to turn around. Ellen turned on the water to warm while she undressed. She put a razor in the shower on the floor by the curtain so she could shave her legs while she was bathing. She stepped in and closed the curtain. The water felt warm and relaxing. She washed slowly, then turned her head under the water and washed her hair. She stood for a few minutes enjoying the splash of the water on her body.

Suddenly the curtain was flung aside. Carrie stood there, grinning at Ellen. Ellen was trapped. She was naked and trapped in a tiny cubicle with no place to go. The scene from the movie Psycho flashed through her mind and she could imagine her own blood flowing down the drain. Her blood curdling screams rent the air as Carrie reached in for her."

Two orderlies and the nurse were quickly in the roor. Carrie was removed protesting that she hadn't done and Ellen was dried, wrapped up in a blanket and taken sobbing to a couch in the lounge. Danny, the young orderly, sat beside her, arm around her shoulders and talked to Ellen, gradually calming her down.

“I want out of that room,” said Ellen.

“I know Babe, but you can’t. You are the only one that gets along with Carrie. Carrie is a sick person and needs someone calm like you are a friend. If you are gone, she will be lost.”

“BUT what about me?” cried Ellen. “She’ll kill me next!”

The nurse came into the room and spoke. “It’s OK, Ellen. Carrie says she is sorry she frightened you. She is only afraid that you will be thinking of suicide. She saw that you had taken your razor into the shower and she thought you were going to kill yourself. She said you had been very depressed lately. You are a very quiet person and don’t open up like the others. Carrie was only concerned about you, and she is very sorry that she frightened you. Now I’ll give you a sleeping pill and you are to go back to bed and go to sleep. I think you are just your past carrying away your imagination. You are perfectly safe here. Now let’s go back to your room.”

Ellen saw that it was now use. She meekly took the offered pill and went back to her room. “If I die, I die. What difference does it really make?” she thought as she slipped under the covers.

Chapter XXVII

Jerry was the instructor for the afternoon class. Ellen didn't mind going to Jerry's class as he held informal sessions, rambling talk that gradually loosened up the patients. This afternoon Jerry was talking about guilt – his guilt – how much he had hurt his family when he was drinking, how he had stolen from his employer, how he had lied. Gradually others in the room spoke of their guilt. Tom had picked fights with his wife so he could storm out of the house to go to a bar and get drunk. June spoke of how she had “borrowed” a friend's car, then had wrecked it after a mad weekend at Carmel financed by a charge card.

“Ellen, you are always so quiet, so reserved,” Jerry spoke very gently. “Tell us, tell us what is troubling you so much. You know that whatever is said here, stays right here in this room, so why don't you unburden yourself.”

“Yes, there are several things that have been troubling me, and I will speak of one of them.” Ellen was amazed that she was even speaking out loud. “That night when I had been beaten and was staring down the barrel of a rifle, I wasn't afraid to die. Then when the maniac turned on my daughter, I sort of snapped out of it and yelled at her to run. But, Ellen's voice broke slightly, “I don't understand why I didn't try to stop him from going after my daughter! I just stayed in the bedroom and called to her. Why didn't I fight him like I had fought before? Why didn't I throw myself on him to save her?”

“That is simple to answer, Ellen,” said Jerry. “You were in a state of shock. You said that you were prepared to die. You must have been like the gazelle that has been downed by the lion. The gazelle knows that it is beaten by the lion and there is nothing it can do, so it simply submits to its fate, paralysed. I believe that you were in that state of paralysis and were quite incapable of moving. It is a wonder that you called out – must have been mother's dying instinct – for you have to remember that you were very near death just from the effects of alcohol.” Jerry

went to Ellen who sat with her head bowed and put his arm around her. “Ellen, you are a wonderful person and you have a lot to offer the world.” Still holding onto Ellen, he said, “We are all drunks in this room. All of us have gone through tremendous trials. And all of that is in the past. We are starting new now and all that matters is what we do from now on. Put the past where it belongs, in the past. When we stopped drinking we were in a sense born again. That is why AA celebrates birthdays of when they stopped drinking. My own AA birthday was last month – and I was eight years old! We got ourselves into these messes over years of time. Time in which we used “Stinking’ thinking” and it will take time to change. But – we are blessed in one regard. It has been proven that alcoholics are highly intelligent people. The other side of that is that it has also been proven that we are highly sensitive. By being so sensitive, we tend to be overly critical – of ourselves. Let’s try to use our intelligence to learn, to learn about ourselves and about others. To not be so hard on ourselves, to shrug it off when someone picks on us. So think about that – and I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

Ellen walked back to her room alone, thinking about what had been said. As she approached her door, she saw Danny, the orderly, coming toward her.

“Ellen, glad I caught you. You have a message at the nurse’s station.”

“Thanks, Danny. I’ll go right away.”

“Ellen, you have a message to call your daughter. You can use the hall phone as always. There was an inquiry about you while you were in class. Someone called asking if we had a patient by the name of Ellen Wright. I know that you were admitted under the name of Thompson, but of course I also know that your legal name is Wright.”

“But who would want to know where I am? My family knows.”

“He didn’t identify himself. But anyway, we never give out any information on patients over the phone. That is confidential

information. Don't worry Ellen, it was probably some nosy neighbor."

"But they would just call my daughter. Besides, I only used the name Write for five days. Hardly anyone knew me by that name!"

"Don't worry, Ellen. You are safe here," replied the nurse.

"Hi, Karen, what's up? Is everything all right?"

"Oh, Mom, I'm so glad you called. That nurse would let me talk to you. Mom, I got a call from the cops. They asked if James had called or anything or I had seen him. They said that he walked way and hasn't come back!"

"Oh, my God," moaned Ellen.

"Anyway, they say that he isn't dangerous and for us to not worry, but to let them know if he should show up. Can you believe that?"

"Karen, I want to come home!"

"No, Mom. I want you, but we will be OK. Steve is here and so is Kelly and his girl. Steve never lets me go anywhere alone and we keep the rifle right by us when we are home. No, you stay there. I shouldn't have told you about it."

"I'm glad you did. I have to learn to deal with things again. But I want you to promise me you will be extra careful. Don't take any chances. Be sure the house is locked up at all times. I love you so much, Karen."

"Oh, Mom, I love you too. And you should just super. I'll come up tomorrow to see you. Don't worry, everything will be OK!"

Ellen hung up the phone slowly. As she walked back to her room she thought, "I had better convince everyone here that I am well in a hurry. I know that I am not going to drink anymore, they just don't know it. Someway I have to convince them that I am OK so I can be released early. I have to get home!"

The next day was the day for the doctor to visit the Care Center. Ellen asked to see him for an examination.

"You're doing fine, Ellen. Coming along nicely. Skin is much improved, most of the bruises are gone. That one bad one

will probably stick around for awhile. You are lucky, you know, that you didn't sustain any broken bones. That was quite a blow you took."

"That's good news, Doctor, and I hope that you will inform the right people that it is all right for me to be discharged."

"Well, you may be much improved physically, but I doubt very much if you could make it for every long outside this facility. Give yourself some more time. The world will get along without you for a little while longer."

Discouraged, Ellen left the office, but she resolved that she would do her best to get out of the center early. She would try a new tact. She would act as though she was going along with the therapy and that way she would be able to convince them to let her go.

The next day Ellen was granted a pass. She was allowed to leave the center and go for a walk to the nearby shopping center. She was delighted with her freedom. The thought of being alone and on her own was exhilarating. As she was leaving, some of the new patients stopped her and asked her to buy him some shaving lotion. He told her he had forgotten to bring some with him and would she mind picking some up for him. Ellen spend her hour walking around the shops, looking in the windows now all decorated for Christmas. She hoped she would get out of the center to be home for Christmas. With funds do low, it would be meager, but she and Karen would be together. All too soon, the precious hour was up and she returned to the center, stopping off at the new patient's room first and delivering the shaving lotion.

"Tell me, Ellen," said Carrie when she returned to her room, "did you see any bars over there? Were you tempted to buy a bottle of wine and get drunk behind some bushes?"

"Of course not," snorted Ellen. "I'm not going to blow my chances of getting out of here. Besides, I'm done with that in my life."

"Boy, you're weird, Ellen. I'd give anything to get a chance to get some booze."

At dinner that night, the new patient didn't show up. Danny was sent to get him, but when Danny came back alone and went immediately to the nurse's station, everyone was curious. A few minutes later, the nurse came out and touched Ellen on the shoulder.

"Come with me, Ellen. I need to talk to you."

Bewildered, Ellen followed the nurse to the examining room where the door was shut.

"Well, Ellen, you really did it!"

"Did what?"

"You know I did. You gave it to me. So what do you mean? Just what is this you think I have done?"

"Jeff, in room 3, says that you bought it for him. So you might as well admit it."

"Come on, now. If you think I bought him alcohol, you're crazy! The only thing I bought for him was shaving lotion. Now get off my case!"

"And just what do you think is shaving lotion's main ingredient? How could you be so stupid, Ellen! The next thing I know, you will be supplying everyone with cough medicine or nighttime cold medicines. Haven't you seen Rosemary? Don't you realize that she got that way from drinking perfume?"

"Oh, my God! I'm so sorry! I just didn't even think of shaving lotion as being alcohol!"

The nurse threw up her hands in disgust/ "Maybe I am being too hard on you, Ellen. It is just that I see so much agony around here and it is all caused by alcohol, in some form or another. Go on back and finish your dinner – but please, don't do anyone a favor and buy anything for them unless you check with someone that knows first!"

Mumbling her apologies, Ellen left the room. She thought she had been pretty clever in drinking vanilla. She never would have considered drinking shaving lotion. She shuddered at the thought.

A few days later during a break between classes, Ellen sat out in the garden behind the center. The air was crisp and the

ground was littered with fallen leaves. A large banana slug made its slow way across the path, leaving its trail of slime behind. Ellen sat with her hands folded in her lap, looking at the garden around her; How beautiful were the patterns of the bare branches etched in the sky. The air was crisp, but so clean and fresh. Ellen felt completely at peace, as though the world was all right once more. “What a strange thought,” she mused. “Everything seems so OK even though I know that it really isn’t. And yet it doesn’t matter that it isn’t, for the part that I am in is going to be all right.”

Danny met her at the door when she came inside. “Been outside, huh? I saw you sitting out there any you looked so serene. I had the feeling that you found serenity out there, just for a moment.”

“Why, yes I did. That was it, it was serenity!”

“A lot of the patients have found it out there. There have even nicknamed it ‘Serenity Garden’. Pretty nice name, I think. You sure have changed, Ellen. You are becoming beautiful – and you were such a mess when you came in. You looked as though you were an old woman and now – well, you are beautiful!”

“Why, Danny, what a nice thing to say!”

“I mean it, Ellen. I know I shouldn’t say this, but I am very much attracted to you. You move with so much grace and you are so quiet. A real lady, is what you are.”

“Oh, Danny, I am much too old for you. But thank you, you have really made my day.”

“I don’t think you are too old for me. You are only ten years older and I swear you don’t show that ten years at all. I mean it, Ellen. I really like you. Think about it.”

“Thank you, Danny. You have been a real help to me, and I’ll remember what you said.”

Ellen spent Christmas at the center. She could have gone home on a pass, but she was determined to prove that she was well and happy at the center so she stayed, helping with the preparation for the dinner, cutting branches from Serenity Garden for the table. She felt Danny’s eyes on her everywhere,

but it was a pleasant feeling to be admired, to be desired. She called Karen and talked with her for half an hour. Karen was cheerful and reported no news on James which was good news. The fact that James hadn't attempted to get into the house made Ellen relax. She told Karen that she would be home soon that even if she didn't get out early, that her 30 days would be up in just a week.

The day after Christmas, Ellen received a phone call from Dick Early.

"Hi, Ellen, it's goof to hear your voice. You sound terrific!"

"Thank you, Sick, that's nice of you to say. But tell me, why did you call?"

"Well, we want you to come back to work and we wanted to know if you felt you were ready."

"OF course I'm ready. I'm so glad that you will take me back. I promise you that you will have no further problems with me."

"That's great, Ellen. Really great. If you can come to work tomorrow, that will be ideal. OF course, you realize, that it won't be at this office, but at the branch. We are short handed there and we think a different environment will be best for you anyway."

"I see and I don't agree, but I will accept it."

"That;s wonderful. Then we can count on you tomorrow? I have already cleared with the center and they said they will release you."

"Let's make it day after tomorrow, Dick. I want to get settled at home first. But you can count on me, I'll be there. And thank you, thank you for calling me."

Ellen hung up the receiver and went back to her room. She was going to be free! Suddenly she as frightened. What if she didn't make it out there" The world suddenly felt cold. Here she was so safe, here she was understood for her problem, here was home. She left her room and sought out Danny.

"Danny, I'm so glad I found you!"

"What is it, Babe?"

“I’m leaving tomorrow. I’m going back!”

“Hey, that’s great! And early too – you see? I knew you would make it!”

“But Danny, I’m so scared! This has become home to me. Everyone knows me and understands me here – and they don’t out there!” Her voice quavered as she spoke.

“You’ll be fine, Babe. You’ll make it just fine. And now that you are going to not be a patient here, why then I can take you out. How about it?”

Ellen blushed. His eyes were on her and his hands were holding hers. “Sure, why not” she answered, “But Danny, I’m going to miss everyone here so much!”

“Even Carrie?” he teased.

“Well, maybe not her, but all the others,” replied Ellen.

“Well you can come back for the night classes you know, and that will give us a chance to see each other more often. Plan on it, Babe. It will keep you in touch. IF you have problems out there, we will all be here to help you.”

“Thank you, Danny, thanks. That helps a lot, just knowing that I have a place to go.”

The next day Ellen went back to her home. She spent half a day just cleaning up her bedroom for Karen has left it alone. Ellen could not believe the horrible mess it was in but she pitched in and did the best she could. The stains in the hardwood floors would not come out so she placed scatter rugs over them. She was appalled by the number of bottles she found. She moved the furniture around until the room became different that the one she had almost died in. When it was neat and orderly, she went in and took a shower in her own bath and she stood under the water, she vowed she would never have to clean up a mess like that again.

Chapter XXVIII

As Ellen walked in the door of the branch office, a stout, blonde woman got up to meet her. “You must be Ellen,” she said, “come on in and let’s get started. I am Charlotte, and I will be your new supervisor.”

“Yes, I remember you. I talked with you several times on the phone,” replied Ellen.

“Well, I know all about you, Ellen, and I don’t hold it against you. I just want you to work and work well. You had a very good work performance before you became ill and I hope you will be able to achieve it once more.”

“Thank you, Charlotte, I will do my best,” said Ellen.

A few minutes later the rest of the staff came in, three women in their late 20’s chattering away. They each came over and introduced themselves to Ellen, then went back to their own desks and to work. The morning passed quickly, but Ellen was still relieved to see the lunch hour come around so she could take a break. As Ellen reached for her coat which was in a small alcove next to the restroom, she heard two of the girls chatting in the other room.

“Well, I don’t like it! How do we know that she won’t get funny and come in here smashed or something?”

“Yeah, I know what you mean! We need help, but do we need the help of a drunk?”

Ellen’s cheeks burned and tears stung her eyes. Quickly she blinked them back and turning away, she held her head up high. “Well, what did you expect?” she told herself, “After all, you didn’t think they would welcome you with open arms, did you? How would you feel if you were in their place? Besides, they are only speaking the truth. You are a drunk, but you are going to prove that a drunk can come back and be a worthy human being again. And you are not going to cry again, ever!”

It was New Year’s Eve and as the office emptied for the holiday, the girls were chattering about their holiday plans. Ellen fe’t very left out as she had no plans other than to go home and

put her feet up and try to relax. Then she thought of the perfect place to go – back to the Center. She would be among friends and it was a safe place. Smiling, she waved goodbye to her co-workers and went out the door.

The days turned into weeks. Ellen went up to the Center at least twice a week. She listened at the classes, she asked question about her affliction and she became friends with the nurse. She even learned why the tongue depressors were taped to everyone’s bed – for every access if a patient should have a convulsion, a likely occurrence for someone coming down from the effects of alcohol. She learned that the mess of pills she had swallowed at every meal were mostly vitamins, B’s and C, along with a mild tranquilizer which then was eliminated as the patient progressed in treatment. And she learned not to be ashamed of her illness, but to be proud that she had begun to learn how to live without alcohol. She was able to drink coffee again and her appetite had increased. She walked with her head held high and it wasn’t long before she had gained the respect of the girls in the office and of Charlotte, her new boss.

The end of January Ellen and her attorney met at the courthouse and in a very simple procedure, her marriage was annulled and she became Ellen Thompson once more.

One cold blustery evening in February, Ellen was sitting at the kitchen table, reading the day’s mail. She slit open an envelope and found a Valentine’s Day card from Danny. She smiled as she placed it next to the one that Karen had given her. It hardly seemed possible that it was Valentine’s Day. She had been so busy what with the new job and going up to the Center twice a week, that time had really slipped away. “Why I’ve been sober for over two months now,” she thought. “And I believe that I have never felt better in my life.” The phone on the wall behind her rang and she reached back for it, answering it with a lilt in her voice, reflecting the happiness she felt.

“Ellen, my love, my wife, it is good to hear your voice once more.”

Ellen's blood suddenly ran cold. She as shocked into complete silence.

"Ellen, are you there? This is James, hour husband. I have been worried about you. You are never home and I was afraid you were ill and in a hospital."

"I was ill, but I am well now. Please do not bother me. We are no longer married, you know, so let me alone."

"Wait, Ellen, don't hang up! I must see you! We have some things to settle – you are my wife, no matter what you say, and you must be a good wife and obey your husband!"

"Go away! Leave me alone – I will call the police!"

"Call all you want, Ellen, it won't do you any good. I will be there faster than they will and it will be plenty of time for me to educate you in the proper way for a wife to behave!"

The phone went dead. Ellen frantically dialed the operator and asked for the police.

"Please hurry! He says he can get here before you can! He nearly killed me that last time he beat me !"

"We'll be right there, Mrs. Thompson. Lock your doors and stay out of sight. Don't answer the door except for us!"

Ellen raced for the doors, locking each carefully, pulling the drapes tight at the windows, then she pulled the rifle from under her bed and loaded it. She returned to the living room and finally selected the best spot to wait. She sat on the floor as she could not control her shaking knees, bracing her back on the side of the stereo. She cocked the rifle and held it on the top of her knees, pointed at the front door. Then she heard a sound, the crackling of leaves. Someone was out there. She knew the sounds of her home well and there was definitely someone out there. Now the sounds were on the front steps. She could hear faint rustling, then a metallic click. The door handle slowly turned.

"Ellen, my love, open the door for your husband."

"No! Go away!"

"Ellen, it is no use – your time has come. You see, I have a gun and this time I am going to kill you. I know you are alone

for I saw Karen and her boyfriend leave. You might as well let me in and make it easier on yourself. I promise it will be quick. But – if you don't let me in, then I shall have to break in and hunt you down and then it will not be quick and painless. You did this, for you promised to be a good wife and you disobeyed me. Now you must pay!"

"No! No! Go away! The police are on the way! You can't get away with this!"

"Yes I can – I shall be finished by the time they get here, finished and gone. But even if they do catch me, they will only lock me up for a while, a short while, and I will be free again."

Ellen heard the sound of the door pushed on, tested, then she heard a step back. "You had better stop! I have the rifle here and I will use it!"

"You will never use it, Ellen – for you are weak, but I will use it on you as I should have done before! In fact I can use my gun now as I can tell just where you are!"

The sound of the shot rent the air, the bullet whizzing over Ellen's head, embedding itself in the far wall. Ellen's shocked eyes saw the hole in the front door and in horror she realized that if she had been standing, she would have been hit. The door was shaking, the hinges were loosening from the force of his blows when Ellen fired.

A larger hole appeared in the door next to the small one left by James' gunshot. A high pitched cry. Then nothing. The air in the room filled with the acrid stench of the fired shell. Ellen cocked the rifle and waited, frozen on her spot on the floor.

Siren, growing louder. Then red lights flashing, flashing red through the holes in the door. Ellen got up from the floor, moved slowly to the door and released the catches, opening the door. She stood there in the light, the light flashing red, the sound of car doors and the voice of men and then the shot rang out.

Chapter XXIX

Epilogue

The rain was coming down heavy when she turned into her driveway. She opened the garage door, getting thoroughly soaked in the process, then parked the car in the garage. As she opened the house door, she was met by a large black cat, meowing with a loud voice.

“Hello, Mouse, did you have a nice day?”

“Murrow,” answered the cat, running between her legs.

“Come on, let’s get something to eat.”

After she fed Mouse, she went back to the bedroom and removed her wet stocking and shoes, slipping into a pair of warm, fleece lined slippers. She toweled her wet hair dry, then ran a comb through it. Her face looked back at her – a calm, rather pretty face. “Hum, you still have nice eyes,” she thought. The incident at the grocery store came back into her mind and with it thought of the past. All the horrors she had endured seemed as though it had really happened to someone else, but then so much had changed. She had sold the house where so much had happened and moved to Oregon. Now she had a home where overlooking the ocean in a quite small town. She lived alone with her cat, Mouse, and as she watched the ocean waves she thought of how they are like the surges of life – large one smashing down on the shore, little ones lapping at the sand running around the little feet of the sandpipers. Life was how you met those waves. You could run and hide from those large crashing ones or you could meet them face on.

She thought of Kelly, poor Kelly. He was older now, but still looking for the easy way in life. He as still ducking large waves. She felt pity for him and wished that he could learn form her experiences – that he would listen to her and not keep looking for the easy way out. She knew that he was an alcoholic and she mourned for him. He was her son and she still loved him, having forgiven him long ago for the hurt he had inflicted on

her. She could forgive him, but she wondered if he could ever forgive himself.

Karen was 25 now. That hardly seemed possible. She still had her long, lovely blonde hair. She called her mother frequently and the love between them was stronger with the passing time. Yes, Karen had turned into a beautiful person. Yet, she was tough and Ellen knew she would be all right.

Ellen's mother called each Saturday. She still could not see why Ellen had moved to the 'wilderness' where it was so cold and wet, but she understood that this was what Ellen wanted and so she accepted it.

Warren had been up to visit several times. He had asked Ellen to marry him again, but Ellen didn't want marriage. She admitted that she was fearful of the type of relationship, maybe later, but not now.

That Valentine's Day so many years ago. What a horror that had been. The last shot fired had singed her hair and as it passed her head and joined the other bullet in the wall. The police had searched diligently, but no trace of James could be found, only the blood on the front steps remained. He never came back for his car and Ellen sold it to one of Steve's friends for \$25, glad to be rid of it, not caring whether it was legal or not for her to sell it.

But that was all long ago. Her life was peaceful and serene now. Her friends were amazed when she told them she was an alcoholic, "Why you couldn't be a drunk, Ellen! Not you!" they would say, and the rewards came when she gave advice about a friend or relative who was drinking too much. Ellen felt that she had a place in this beautiful world, of only to help others who cared for someone afflicted with the same illness as Ellen had. She eased the guilt that they felt when their loved one would not be helped by them. She advised them where to seek help if not for their loved one, then for themselves.

As she reached over to turn out the bathroom light, she looked again at her face. Eyes calm and clear, hair shiny and lustrous, skin clear except for the mark below her left eye – a

mark that had never gone away, even with the years, but still remained, forever a reminder. A mark that curiously looked like the Ace of Spades.

The End

Postscript from Mouse (who lived to be 22 human years old)

I must admit that I don't hunt much anymore. It is nice to just sit in the sun or sit on HER lap. I am glad to report that SHE doesn't let the toms come around to see HER anymore. I don't think SHE minds too much, as after all, I am here, and SHE tells me that SHE loves me, and I purr back that I love HER too.