

Chapter 1

A BAD MARRIAGE can last forever, but a marriage brushed by insanity will crash and burn in no time at all.

Alan Sarnower—psychiatrist, father, and devoted practitioner of the up-early, home-late middle class work ethic—swung his legs off the stale, rumpled bed on to the already hot summer floor and reviewed his situation. Things were tanking. Fast.

Three weeks ago, after returning home from a family outing at a local crafts fair, his wife Cassie had locked herself in their bedroom, slamming the door. Sarnower and Mitch, their ten year old son, heard banging drawers, and things being thrown. Something smashed. A crazed, raving monologue with screamed obscenities and sharp bursts of laughter accompanied the tornado.

They stood outside the door, frozen in disbelief at what was happening on the other side. Time to take charge Sarnower finally decided, shaking off the paralysis of shock. He knocked loudly on the door several times. “Cassie! Cassie! Open up. Open the door. Now!” But the manic destruction continued. Sarnower leaned into the door with all his weight and pushed, but the new locks he’d installed resisted him.

Gradually the noise abated. Cassie was apparently focusing on something specific and purposeful. Sarnower banged again and this time the door was opened. A packed suitcase sat on the middle of the large double bed. The room was a complete disaster. Dresser drawers were pulled out, clothes strewn and piled on the floor, pictures ripped from the wall. Sarnower’s night table lay on its side, the phone off the hook bleating like an injured lamb. The antique leather change and jewelry caddy, a treasured gift from his late father, was on the floor in several pieces. Its contents—coins, cuff

links and his beloved gold Vacheron dress watch were flung everywhere. Books had been pulled from the small bookcase and lay opened and splayed out in painful cheerleader splits. A copy of his own book, *Ice Fishing in the Unconscious: Trusting Your Midlife Self*, a self-help paperback written quickly years ago, was torn in half at the spine. His own publicity photo, with early-eighties loud wide tie and over-the-ear haircut stared up at him idiotically from the floor. The absurdity of seeing his twenty-year younger self dampened a growing rage.

“Cassie,” he said quietly.

“Don’t give me that fucking shrink voice of yours,” she screamed. “Save it for your patients. You should be getting some serious psychological help yourself.”

She was trying to close the suitcase, which bulged with a random assortment of clothes.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

She smirked. “You’d really like to know, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, I would.”

“I would too,” Mitch said. In the melee, both had forgotten the boy was standing right there. He’d seen and heard everything. What kind of bleeding hole was this scene going to leave in his psyche? Sarnower had spent much of his practice working with divorcing parents, and now all their detritus was washing up on his own beach.

“Let’s calm down and figure this out, shall we?”

“Shall we? *Shall we?*” she mocked. “You’re truly pathetic Alan. It’s already figured,” she said as she finally closed the suitcase.

“Would you mind telling me what this is all about?” he asked. The pointlessness of the question almost made him laugh. She ignored it and took their son by the shoulders.

“Mitch, I’m going to be gone for a while, ok?” He started to cry. Quickly, Cassie wiped his tears with a corner of her dress.

“Where, Mom?” There was a jagged, torn element in his voice. Something primitive was rising in the boy.

“Oh, that’s really not important, honey.”

“Yes it is. I want to know. Can I call you?”

In the past, Cassie would have shown at least a semblance of support, a gesture of tenderness. Now Mitch’s anguish was just an annoyance. She ignored his question, picked up the suitcase and headed downstairs through the hall to the front door.

Sarnower had to act. But do what? Barricade the door? Take the suitcase from her? Given things as they were, any intervention would make matters worse. He tried to comfort himself with the thought that she would cool down and call later, but out of the fog of wishful thinking, it seemed an unlikely possibility. Better just to let her go. Whatever this was, it might wear itself out.

At the front door Cassie turned to him, straining with the bulging suitcase.

“I don’t suppose you’d help me carry this out to my car?”

He played the request over in his mind. Help his wife leave their safe, predictable house to start off on some haphazard, possibly dangerous adventure in this condition? Her fury had temporarily pried him away from his own moorings like an out-of-body experience. No, this was crazy.

“You won’t help me? Fine. I’ll do it myself.” One hundred and twelve pound Cassie heaved the case, which must have weighed at least half of that, opened the door and started down the front steps. Enraged people temporarily acquire super-human strength he remembered reading somewhere. Here was a textbook in psychopathology brought vividly to life. She popped open the trunk to her car and hurled the bag in with the fluid arc of a professional shot-putter.

“You were never there to help me. *Ever!* You dumb *fuck!*” she screamed.

Over the din of his lawn mower, Fred Cerillo, the neighbor across the street stopped mowing and looked up. He cut the power and crossed the street.

“Alan, everything all right?” he asked. At that moment, they saw Cassie peel her Celica out of the driveway and on to the road. Although Sarnower was numb with anger and confusion, he chuckled in spite of himself. *Peeeeoon!* The Road Runner taking off in a cloud of dust. He must have seen those cartoons hundreds of times as a child on his parent’s old black and white TV. “Beep beep,” he said softly to himself. Then, turning to Fred he said “yeah, everything’s under control.”

About a year ago, he’d begun to notice Cassie acting strangely, or more accurately, stranger than usual. Always something of an oddball, Cassandra Kelly had an infectious, funny, irreverent take on things that Sarnower had found refreshing while they were dating. She was the sixth of seven children from an old-fashioned Irish Catholic family and was full of outrageous anecdotes of

drunken parties, older brothers getting into slapstick scrapes with the law, comical priests and nuns from parochial school, all of whom could easily have stepped out of an old Mack Sennett comedy. She would deliver stories with wonderful timing and wicked accents and hold an entire table of beer drinkers at Chances R, the local watering hole, in the palm of her hand.

Sarnower had been smitten immediately. The long strawberry blond hair, the fresh scrubbed looks, a seductive, mischievous smile all promised naughty fun; a welcome balance to his tendency to be buttoned-down and overly studious.

They had married after college before medical school, but had gotten off to a rocky start. Cassie resented his long hours. She felt his dedication to becoming a doctor was “self-indulgent.” Away from Chicago, living in Cambridge where Sarnower was busting his hump at Harvard, there were no ready-made audiences to entertain. The world had gradually spun into a new appreciation of sobriety, twelve-step programs, aerobics, healthy eating and natural highs. The drunken madcap antics had lost their humor. Things had moved on, but Cassie hadn’t.

Last year, on a trip to Disney World with Mitch over spring vacation, Cassie had started giggling out of the blue, at odd times, and at things that weren’t funny—at the weather report, at a sappy song on the radio, while cooking dinner, it could be anything at all. At first, Sarnower didn’t know what to make of it, sensing perhaps she was finally relaxing after a long and difficult winter during which her mother had died suddenly of a massive stroke. He was tempted to write it off as a delayed grief reaction. But when he asked her about it, she had turned on him with an unexpected, frightening rage: “Can’t a person laugh a little in this goddamn house?” she shouted.

“Sure...of course.”

“Does everything have to be so fucking serious with you? Do you have to control everyone all the time?”

Sarnower backed off, as much from the surprise of her attack as from not knowing how to respond, particularly since Mitch had come into the room and had stared wide-eyed and disbelieving at his mother. He’d let it slide.

Gradually the giggling was accompanied by strange facial movements, almost grimaces, as if she were responding to some private, internal drama. He’d become concerned. As a first year resident in psychiatry, he had seen the same kinds of contortions in

the faces of patients on locked wards. Of course they were heavily medicated with anti-psychotic drugs and frequently over time, began to show the unmistakable signs of tardive dyskinesia, the involuntary spasmodic movement of facial muscles that would forever place them in the ranks of the profoundly ill. Even after the meds were withdrawn, the side effects would set like an indelible stain.

Then Cassie's thoughts and speech began to race. At times, Sarnower couldn't understand what she was talking about. She would drift from subject to subject, misusing common words, even inventing new ones, talking as if the whole word salad made sense. "Back up, slow down," he would ask. She'd look at him with contempt.

"Why is Mom mad at us?" his son had asked him one Sunday afternoon while they were clearing dead winter leaves from the yard.

"I don't think she's mad at us, Mitch," he answered slowly. "She's had a hard time, you know, with Grandma dying. Sometimes when people are sad like that, they get angry about things they've lost."

Mitch had stopped raking and looked Sarnower right in the eyes, something he almost never did. The urgency in his gaze was alarming and flashed something a ten year old shouldn't be expected to handle.

"She's not sad, Dad, she's different. Really different." Nothing had been lost on him. What else had he picked up that he wasn't letting on?

"I know what you mean," Sarnower admitted, giving up any pretense at invention. Sometimes his son reminded him of an ancient Buddha connected to an ageless stream of wisdom. At times, Sarnower had come upon him reading quietly, deeply engrossed in a book, and was struck by a resemblance to an old sepia photograph of his own father as a young boy. His father, with deep brown eyes and a Buster Brown haircut had been caught reading a book by a clever photographer, in a rare (for those days) spontaneous shot at roughly the same age Mitch was right now. He wore the fleeting incandescence of the fictional world he was immersed in, yet showed the beginning of surprise at being yanked by an old sulfur flashbulb into the present moment.

"What's wrong with Mom?" Mitch pressed. How to explain, or even try to explain at all? What could he handle? He was smart enough to see through any attempt at evasion; that would just put

distance between them at a time when they needed to trust each other. Mitch would tolerate a gauzy version of the truth, but was too old for fairy tales.

What *was* wrong exactly? Sarnower wasn't completely sure himself. Everyone's screwed up somehow to one degree or another, but when do the little character twists, the annoying idiosyncrasies begin to pile up and become something else?

Never particularly warm, Cassie had basic decency and a need to see that everyone was having fun, though under that demeanor lay a dark, guarded shyness. She'd been an observer, not a player in her family, adept at hiding from her father's unexpected wrath or embarrassing behavior from her mother. Her siblings dominated the stage—Cassie managed the props and scenery. It was easy for her to get lost in the constant movement and buzzing blur of family life. Her mother, either out playing bridge all afternoon or getting smashed on gin in front of the daytime soaps. Cassie learned to get her own after-school snacks, always walking softly to the kitchen. Her father was often tied up for over an hour each way in commuter traffic. His series of dead-end sales jobs ate away at him from the inside out so he'd come home roaring, a purple vein in his forehead ready to burst. An advantage to growing up in a large family, she learned; the swells could wash over you as you hid at the bottom of the ocean floor.

Sarnower himself was an only child, introspective and precocious, envied and resented by his parents. His birth had been an accident he overheard his mother whisper one day when he was eight, to a distant cousin out in Ohio.

He read voraciously: history, philosophy, biographies of scientists: Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, Louis Pasteur. Paul deKreuf's *Microbe Hunters*, Hans Zinsser's *Rats, Lice and History*, anything related to science or disease. Why wasn't he out playing baseball, getting some fresh air his father would ask. Leave him alone, his mother would fire back, can't you see he's reading? He identified himself early on as the source of their constant bickering. Was that the way all parents were? He would go over to friends' houses and stay for dinner. There was civil conversation, interest in the other person's life, a warm, low-keyed atmosphere of give and take, often some light music in the background. Why wasn't his life at home like that?

And his own marriage. Could he honestly say he'd done his best? There'd been so many demands on him, his time and his resources. There was medical school, internship and residency. Weeks and

months would go by, sometimes without even so much as a day off. On the occasional free weekend, he'd be preoccupied thinking about cases or an impending presentation. Cassie would want to go out to dinner and a movie, sometimes making plans with other couples. Sarnower would drag himself along, to an inexpensive Indian or Mexican restaurant in Cambridge and a movie at the old Orson Wells Theater afterwards, often so tired he'd sleep through it.

Inevitably, his fatigue and disengagement would lead to an argument. Cassie was right to be angry, he could have looked interested in dinner conversation, made more of an effort to be genial. The few friends they managed to make were puzzled. More than once each had been asked what they saw in the other. He'd always found the question surprising. Weren't they compatible? Didn't all couples get on each other's nerves? Certainly his parents did, and from what he'd seen of Cassie's family, well, they were easily as dysfunctional as his.

Did that mean they weren't supposed to be together? When his mother had asked him before they got married if he loved Cassie, the question caught him off-guard. He supposed he did. It was a question he pondered late at night when he'd look over and see Cassie sleeping on her side, snoring quietly. No one had a great marriage, did they? You got married as a ticket into adult society. You could have children and all the routine, boring sex you wanted. There'd be someone to rock with on the porch later on in life.

But now things had changed. As Cassie's illness progressed, so did his awareness of all that had slipped by, the years he could have spent challenging himself, asking the tough questions, struggling for answers rather than settling in passively for the long ride. Her craziness had moved in like a fog, imperceptible at first, then overtaking everything until all the familiar landmarks in her personality had vanished.

Sarnower sucked in his gut and began. "Mom is ill." He looked into his son's eyes and they held each other's gaze with the intensity of trapeze artists. "Not ill like when you have a cold or the flu. Sometimes, people's thoughts and feelings get very mixed up. Did you ever get really confused about something, like you didn't know what was right or wrong? Or you didn't know whether something was real or out of a dream?"

He stopped. Mitch was getting scared, wanting to know more, but not liking the direction in which this was going. Crazy people were creepy, something ten year olds joked about. Like a haunted house, you didn't want to get too close.

He retreated, his gaze shifting to the ground. “Yeah, kind of.”

Sarnower continued. “Well, Mom’s a little mixed up right now. She’s trying to figure out a lot of things.”

“Can I help her?” Mitch asked. “I’ll really try to keep my room cleaner and put my stuff away.” Sarnower looked at him, the words bringing an unexpected flush of tears to his eyes. This was Mitch’s all, his maximum effort, the best he could do. He was hurting and had to be reassured.

“She’s going to be ok, buddy. I promise.”

He could tell Mitch wasn’t satisfied but had enough grace to let his father off the hook. They finished raking in silence.

Cassie’s condition continued to spiral downward. There were joint visits to a series of psychiatrists and psycho-pharmacologists, the new high priests of brain chemistry management. There were temporary respites where the three of them could enjoy a Sunday afternoon at the Arboretum or a day trip to a North Shore beach, but things quickly reverted. Soon there were pressured late night calls to doctors, all of them difficult to reach, despite Sarnower’s professional connections. Medications were prescribed and changed, side effects analyzed and debated, courses of treatment considered, including short-term hospitalization. Nothing seemed to be effective, and Cassie’s anger at the process was mounting.

Two days after her unhinged, surreal departure, Sarnower received a call from the Boston Police Department. Her car had been found parked in front of a fire hydrant in the North End near Logan airport. It had been towed to a city lot near the wharfs. They were calling to let him know they had the car and that fines were accruing at the rate of \$300 per day. A note in her handwriting had been found taped to the inside of the windshield. “Split for the coast,” was all it said. One of the windows had been smashed and the car had been looted.

Sarnower canceled a day’s worth of appointments and made the unfamiliar trip out to the city’s municipal lot. To get a taxi to take him there from sleepy Newton was not easy, but he finally persuaded a dispatcher to entice one of his hacks with an added fifty-dollar bonus to make the trip. They rode through decrepit neighborhoods, past abandoned lots and rotting factories; places he’d never seen before despite his decades in the Boston area. But the driver, a swarthy Middle Eastern, surely in this country for only a fraction of that time, got him there quickly in his shock-less, strut-less cab.

The lot was huge. As far as he could see there were rows and rows of cars radiated curling waves of heat in the baking sun, all

enclosed in a high chicken-wire fence with a razor-wire coil running along the top. A small office looking more like a worn beachside seafood restaurant displayed a weathered sign assuring him he was in the right place. Sarnower entered and was immediately assaulted by the odor of sweating bodies and stale junk food. A bored cop in shirtsleeves was reading the *Boston Herald* in a chair propped up against the wall, a toothpick playing in his mouth. Inside an old wire cage, a fat, sweating clerk, bursting through his soaked uniform, stamped multi-copied forms with a crisp rhythmic beat. Cash or credit card only, a sign announced. The sergeant who had contacted him about the car had reiterated that message several times. No checks under any circumstances.

Sarnower fished out his wallet and began hunting for his Visa card. Subsidizing insanity does not come cheap. The original ticket and towing were \$225. Two days of storage, another \$600. The cab ride with promised bonus, ninety dollars. Your wife in a loony bin? Priceless at this point. He was out almost a grand. And let's not forget her fantasy trip to the coast. The ticket, impulsively bought, and God knows what kind of accommodations in LA or San Francisco, or wherever she was. She would burn through his money in a hell-bent fury. He wondered what it would take to put a stop on her credit card.

He gave the clerk Cassie's name and the plate number of the car. While the man thumbed through a stack of forms, Sarnower heard him sing the unmistakable strains of *E lucevan le stelle* from *Tosca*.

"An opera buff, eh?" Sarnower asked, glad for the novelty and distraction.

He nodded as he pushed a set of forms and a cheap plastic pen through the cage window. "Here, here and here," he said, pointing with a huge finger to lines that required signatures. The voice was full and melodious, not at all the expected deep cigarette growl. He smiled at Sarnower, who ordinarily would have given a compliment or made small talk. But today he was too far-gone, fried from his heated thoughts.

After signing the papers and the credit card receipt, the clerk opened the cage window and leaned his enormous bulk out.

"Lot on your left. Row M," he said with a lilt, gently tipping his head. Sarnower nodded in thanks, and in that moment, from nowhere, in his own craggy bathroom baritone, he started singing:

"Oh Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are callin'"

On the second phrase, the clerk himself joined in. At the door, Sarnower stopped at the door and turned while the clerk took over and brought the ballad to a heroic conclusion. As he hung on the last note, as clean and shimmering as Pavarotti, Sarnower could hear fellow co-workers in the back offices applaud wildly. Even the sleepy cop against the wall was roused to attention, and Sarnower who was always affected by the easy sentimentality of “Danny Boy” felt a lump rise in his throat and struggled to keep from tearing up. Singing Irish ballads with John McCormick: priceless. He was well out of the door and heading for Cassie’s car before he broke down sobbing.

All that was three weeks ago. Today was going to be tough; seven patients in a row without so much as a lunch break. Mitch was now in day camp, so logistically things should have been easier, but Sarnower’s new role as a single parent was proving difficult. Even simple decisions had become hard to make. It was Thursday, late June and hot. What to wear? His patients would expect the crisp laundry-pressed cotton shirt with a tasteful tie. Sharply creased khakis and polished cordovan loafers completed the modified prepped-out look that Sarnower had cultivated since starting practice. While many of his colleagues wore business suits even in the summer, he had felt them too rigid. His patients weren’t applying for a bank loan after all. A neat but casual appearance more easily equalized power, invited trust and encouraged openness.

But today would have to be different. He was running out of clean clothes. A crumpled polo shirt lay across the back of a chair and Sarnower put it on in a quick motion. Since Cassie’s departure, basic housekeeping had eluded the sporadic, halfhearted attempts he and Mitch had made to bring order to things. Several days worth of dirty clothes overflowed the hamper. A pile of shirts needed to go to the laundry. The kitchen floor was getting sticky, and the increasing heat and humidity only accelerated the process. Half-eaten salads and cartons of take-out Chinese food liquefied in the refrigerator in various shades of brown and gray. This weekend we’re really going to get organized. Set aside a whole day. Top-to-bottom clean up. A handsome cash incentive offered to Mitch would increase the chances of things happening. Probably. Maybe. Maybe not.

Kids today didn’t have the same zest for earning money that he’d had as a boy. In his son’s room, he constantly found change under the bed and strewn all over the floor as if the coins were worthless as old gum wrappers. At Mitch’s age, he’d eagerly saved the quarters and dimes he earned at simple household chores, for a

movie, or a paperback book. But Mitch and all his peers had grown used to transacting their business in bills and had no use for the nuisance of metal currency. At the mall, some of the more audacious stores had even starting asking their young customers if they wanted their change at all.

“Mitch!” he called. “Get ready. Tracey’s going to be here in a minute.”

Tracey Bowen, a seventeen-year old living down the block had been engaged to help Sarnower navigate Mitch through the day after Cassie had left. She was spindly and gawky as a colt, an honors student at Newton South High School, already aiming for pre-med in college. She would drive Mitch to and from camp, play-dates, do light shopping and run errands. Always prompt, always reliable. Despite several pleas to drop formality and call him Alan, she persisted in calling him Dr. Sarnower, and to his relief, she had no boyfriends, tattoos or body piercings. That was as close as you could get these days to the wholesome American girl. But as eager as she was not to flaunt any shred of sexuality, Sarnower felt himself oddly stirred in her presence.

In fact, since Cassie’s departure, he was stirred in the presence of nearly every woman he came in contact with. Was he just horny after several weeks, months really, without sex? No, something else was going on, something deeper, some kind of liberation. He was looking at women with a reawakened teen-age eye. “Middlence” was how he had heard it described by a colleague, common in men beginning a midlife crisis. It gave him a fresh view, with a full-color spectrum of possibilities.

Mitch bounded down the stairs as Tracey, reliable as a Greenwich clock, appeared at the screen door.

“Good morning, Dr. Sarnower,” she smiled, beaming brightly.

“Hi Tracey,” he said, trying to return a smile half as luminous as hers. Mitch ran into her arms for a sister-hug. Clearly he was missing a woman’s touch as well.

“Bathing suit? Towel? Ice cream money?” She asked in staccato military style.

“Check, check and check!” he snapped. The day could not begin without this bit of ritual. It pleased Sarnower as well to see some kind of predictability and regularity returning to their lives.

“If it’s ok with you Dr. Sarnower, I’d like to take Mitch after camp. A group of us are going to play softball and then have a cookout. I thought Mitch might enjoy it.”

“What do you say, champ?” he asked as his son lit up.

“Sure, Dad.” Mitch was raising and lowering himself on the balls of his feet.

“I’ll make sure he doesn’t eat too many hotdogs,” she said leading Mitch out the door to her Honda.

“Have a good one,” Sarnower called after them.

Athletic too. He caught a glimpse of her lean calves, and for a brief moment coddled a visual image of a languid, sweaty Tracey removing a dusty baseball jersey, unselfconscious and comfortable in her tight, muscular body. Although tempted to savor it, he shook his head and pushed it away. Those little “lust breaks” were becoming frequent and causing distractions at important times, during therapy sessions, driving, on the phone. A patient, calling from a hastily arranged business meeting and needing to reschedule an appointment had been freaked.

“Dr. Sarnower? Are you all right?”

“Uh, sure. Why do you ask?”

“I was asking if we could change our session time. You seemed to be drifting off somewhere.”

Regrouping quickly: “I’m fine, just busy. We’ll see you at six tonight.”

“I asked for *seven*.”

“I’m sorry. That’s right. Seven.”

In between patients, in the ten minute break he allowed himself to write progress notes or visit the bathroom, he would frequently drift off into a humid tableau; time would disappear until he was interrupted by the beep of his intercom that let him know his next patient was ready.

With Mitch en route to a cool swim, arts and crafts and the promise of a sticky-sweet, starchy lunch, Sarnower was ready to head to the office.

He stopped at the hall mirror to do a quick once-over. Not too bad, all things considered. Hair neatly combed, his smooth face rosy and tight with a splash of lime cologne (citrus in the summer, musk in the winter he’d once read in *GQ*.) The black polo shirt, although rumpled on the couch looked fine when tucked into his khakis. Since Cassie had left, Sarnower had lost almost twenty pounds, putting him within range of his old college weight. His closet offered things he hadn’t worn in years, clothes that now draped nicely on his frame. *The Psychiatrist’s Guide to Quick Weight Loss*—his next book. Chapter One: *Dealing With the Crazy*

Significant Other—that’s ten pounds right off the top. Nothing like prolonged mental anguish to reverse that stubborn middle age spread. Women, he discovered, were now taking that extra moment to notice him, splashing fuel on his already hot set of fantasies.

At eight-thirty in the morning the heat was already extreme. The outside brass door handle was almost too hot to touch as Sarnower pulled it closed behind him. The air, now humid as well, bathed him in an old-world *schvitz*. On days like these, he found it hard to breath and the extra effort only made him sweat more. The car door handle, also too hot to touch, required the aid of a handkerchief. Despite a reflecting screen in the front window, the open door sent a blast of heat that almost made him swoon, like getting out of bed too quickly and seeing a checkerboard pattern before keeling over.

The task now was to turn on the air conditioner without getting third degree burns. Reaching the ignition from outside the car without touching the steering wheel would be a contortion, but he got the key in on the first try and the vents hummed to life, spewing a hot, moldy gas before the reassuring basso hum of cool air began to flood the car.

Although the trip to the office was less than a mile away, it could easily leave him depleted on a day like this. It was barely the duration of an NPR story on the radio, but it was just enough time for his thoughts to coalesce again and bring into sharp relief the full impact of his situation. Where the hell *was* Cassie? He had contacted her credit card company, and after a large cash withdrawal in San Francisco, there had been no more activity on her card. When he’d called the police and showed them the note left in her car, they had laughed at him. No way were they going to waste valuable resources on this. Couldn’t he read? She’d left on her own. Sergeant O’Connor, who had talked to Sarnower a few days after the car was found had even intimated that he wasn’t satisfying her sexually and that she’d had taken off in search of someone more “responsive” to her needs. He had even consulted a private investigator who claimed to have seen many cases like this.

“She’ll be home, doc, don’t worry. As soon as the dough runs out, she’ll be back. Save your money. You’ll need it to pay her bills.” What was it going to take? Cassie turning up in jail, or dead?

Sarnower pulled his car into the parking lot just as he had started to contemplate going after her himself. But enough of that. It was time for work.

NOTHING TO SEE HERE

The Chestnut Hill Medical Center, formerly a small department store, had been purchased and remodeled by an enterprising young developer into upscale medical suites in the early nineties. Sarnower had been one of the first tenants and had a comfortable office on the ground floor. A wide, sun-lit atrium dominated the center of the building, which featured a large Japanese reflecting pool complete with naturalistic rocks and exotic fish. Offices were located on all four sides and opened up onto the spacious common area.

Frigid air blasted him as he opened the front glass door. It was an instant twenty-degree drop in temperature. Building maintenance always thought more was better. Did all those eighty-year old women who were here to see their cardiologist or orthopedic surgeon, ever contract pneumonia? At that age, and there were many at that age, the sudden climate change could be unpleasant at best.

Miroslav, the large, obsequious head of maintenance smiled at him over an industrial sized mop. "Gut mornink, doctor," he said, bowing slightly. "Morning," Sarnower returned, nodding. Miroslav was polite to the point of servility to the professionals and patients who streamed through the building at all hours, but as a Czech immigrant from the old Communist days, he was a drill sergeant who delighted in riding herd on his crew. He made sure they always had a presence in their crisp, pressed uniforms, polishing brass, cleaning glass, vacuuming, sweeping and doing whatever needed to be done to keep the Medical Center spotless. The Red Army in Chestnut Hill.

Alan Sarnower, M.D., Psychiatry, black block letters on a brass plaque announced. It had been a gift from Cassie years ago when he had christened the office. He opened the door with a fast twist of the metal knob. Inside, the air was just as cold as it was in the lobby. Sweat was beginning to evaporate and leave his hair and clothes matted and stiff.

The office looked exactly as it had the day he opened for business. A spacious waiting room with a couple of late-eighties chocolate brown leather Crate & Barrel couches were flanked by a set of oak side tables with earth-toned prairie-style lamps. *People* magazine. *Time*. *Money*, *Forbes* and *Sports Illustrated* were there for the driven, acquisitive males in his practice, although over the past few years, he noticed women were passing up *People* and were opting instead for the financials, some even going so far as to tear out articles surreptitiously.

There were expensively framed graphics by David Hockney, Alexander Calder and Robert Rauchenberg on the stark white walls. A bold, geometric Navaho rug covered the hardwood floor, and during the day, to mute the conversations from his consulting room, Public Radio's classical offerings purred gently in the background.

Off to the right side was a small glassed-off enclosure that housed a computer, a desk and a couple of filing cabinets. From there, Nina Winslow, his office manager of five years ran the practice. God, what would I do without her? Sarnower often wondered. Part secretary, part therapist for him, and over the years, guide to the unfathomable reaches of the female psyche and soul, Sarnower put her up there as one of the superb human beings he had been lucky enough to know.

She came to work for him after bouncing around a few years out of college. She exuded an energy and life force that was dazzling. Without even checking references or credentials, Sarnower had hired her on the spot, powerless to do otherwise. She was a quick study and picked up the complex mechanics of running his office in no time. Nina put his waiting patients at ease, although he noticed his male clients were often jazzed by her pulsing sexuality. She wasn't conventionally beautiful, or even very pretty, and Sarnower had spent countless hours trying to figure out what it was, but Nina Winslow gave off something that made men weak in the knees. True, she had a great figure, if a bit padded, but it was all in the right places. The shiny, long blond hair didn't hurt, nor did her skin, a natural year-round tanned, rose-gold color that reminded him of antique jewelry. The husky voice, the wide blue eyes that held you like prison-yard searchlights. Was it pheromones? Sarnower had read about those imperceptible, air-borne molecules of sexual attractants transmitted by several different species. They were supposedly important in human commerce as well. But damned if he could figure it out. Maybe it was the gestalt, the total package. The whole was so much greater than the sum of its parts.

But there she was, back turned to him, the computer printer humming. She was getting his bills out, enriching him monetarily as well as hormonally. This made her even more luscious and valuable. She was unaware he had entered the office as the air conditioner and printer combined to create a sonic wash sufficient to muffle any noise. Her ample blonde hair was up in a knot and she wore a linen peasant blouse with a flattering dark skirt and strap sandals.

Early in her career with Sarnower, they had discussed expectations of appropriate office dress, but as time passed, she had gone her own way, gradually shedding business clothes for a comfortable, upscale retro earth-mother look, her nature asserting itself. As the stock market sunk, terrorists attacked and Cassie left, Sarnower no longer gave a damn, quietly pleased at her resolute display of ease; it was part of her power. Today, he was just grateful she was still with him.

“Hi Nina,” he called over the din. Startled, she jumped and placed a hand over her heart. Such a Victorian a gesture for a twenty-first century woman. She turned, flushed.

“You scared me,” she gasped; relieved it was him.

“Sorry. Just me. Who can hear anything over this...”

“Mr. Zifkin is here,” she said quietly, handing him the charts for the day. “I asked him to wait out here but he insisted on going into your office.”

She looked at him like a guilty child expecting a reprimand.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, placing a hand on her arm.

He took the folders and opened the door to his consulting room. Barry Zifkin, thirty-two, real estate prodigy, loud mouth and royal pain in the ass was standing in the middle of his office studying the diplomas on his wall. Zifkin had made his first five million by the time he was twenty-eight. He wore a dark Armani suit, crisp Turnbull & Asser French-cuff shirt and a hideous dog-vomit tie that must have cost two or three hundred dollars. He had been busted a year ago trying to score cocaine in Dorchester, and as part of his court-ordered probation, in addition to community service and regular attendance at NA meetings, he had to go for twice-weekly therapy sessions. For his admittedly handsome fee, Sarnower had to put up with Zifkin’s bullshit and file monthly reports with his probation officer, who made it clear he saw his charge as a rich candy-ass, who, because of his standing had gotten a cakewalk. Sarnower could not disagree.

“I paid more for my loafers than you spent on medical school,” Zifkin said still inspecting the parchment on the wall.

“You are to stay outside in the waiting area until I call you in.” Sarnower answered with unexpected venom in his voice. Zifkin too was startled and became a baby-faced boy.

“Don’t ever put my office manager in a compromising position again.”

“Ok, ok, point made.” Zifkin held up his hands in mock surrender.

“Let’s begin,” Sarnower said as the two of them sat. “What just happened here? That’s exactly the kind of thing that gets you into trouble. How do you think people feel when you barge in on them?”

Zifkin smiled. Slowly, he took off his suit jacket, folded it neatly and put it on the table next to his chair. Christ, the guy doesn’t even sweat. Even the starched white shirt showed no signs of the day’s punishing heat. He knows this. He’s fucking with my mind. No playing poker with this guy.

“How other people feel?” Zifkin asked, not thinking he’d heard right.

“Yes. Do you ever wonder how what you do affects other people?”

Zifkin laughed. “If I gave a rat’s ass about that, I’d be super-sizing happy meals at McDonald’s.” He leaned forward, his upper lip curling. “Maybe you haven’t picked this up yet, doc, but I’m really not all that interested in what people think of me.”

“No, that comes through loud and clear.” What to do with this guy? Throwing him to the penal system might bring about some dramatic attitude change. Despite his bravado and business acumen, Zifkin wouldn’t stand a chance inside as someone’s bitch. He’d be eaten alive for lunch. The sudden set of visuals put an unconscious smile on Sarnower’s face.

“What are you laughing at?” The man-boy mogul, unnerved, caught the smile as a put-down. Not taking him seriously was his weak point. That was useful to know.

“I’ve got to level with you, Barry,” Sarnower said, carefully sculpting his delivery. While he had the advantage, perhaps something in the avuncular lecture mode. “I really don’t care what you do. You change? That’s great. Fantastic. You don’t? That’s fine too. But I see you in a very deep vat of tapioca if you don’t. You must have something on the ball to have made all that money. Where it is or what it is, I have no idea. But I’m not going to be here next time.” Now rolling, Sarnower felt an unexpected jolt of rage in his chest. “I would strongly suggest you pull your act together. At least try to go through the motions, ‘cause for a smart guy, you’re really pretty stupid.”

Jesus! What had he done? If his old supervisors in psychiatry could hear him! He’d never called a patient stupid before. What was he thinking? Zifkin was intractable, he had a character disorder as wide and deep as the ocean, but Sarnower had lost it, he’d done what he vowed he wouldn’t. He’d let Zifkin get to him, taken it

personally and then he'd humiliated him. A big mistake. Any first year student knew the patient's hostility was an acting-out of the transference, the therapist as stand-in for all the significant people in his life who had done him wrong. There was nothing personal in it.

Sarnower's power as a doctor was reconfirmed. What to do now? The man was wilted, deflated. Now too late, he remembered how Zifkin had described his father, a loud boor who delighted in shaming his children. Without thinking, he'd just stepped right into the old man's shoes. Zifkin needed to be rehabilitated, but at the moment Sarnower was at a complete loss, frozen by his impulsive blunder. Apologizing would be admitting to an unacceptable professional lapse in judgment, and Zifkin, with his stable of aggressive lawyers might catch a whiff of a malpractice suit: irreparable psychological harm. No, now was the time to heed the advice of one of his old teachers. If you don't know what to say, don't say anything at all.

They sat in silence, the air conditioner humming quietly. Sarnower looked straight ahead at Zifkin who returned the stare without blinking. The quartz carriage clock on the bookcase ticked softly, its second hand jerking spastically around the dial five times. Ten times.

Finally, Zifkin's glance drifted to the floor. There were tiny rippling waves under the smooth baby skin of his face. Although fifteen minutes remained in the session, Zifkin got up and reached for his jacket. Sarnower could see pools of sweat under his arms now as he put it on.

"I think I'll leave," he said in a whisper as he headed for the door. Sarnower nodded. What had he done to this guy? He'd have to come up with something before their next session.

Outside, Nina had finished his bills and had stacked them in a pile, stamped and ready to go. On her desk was a tall frosted plastic cup of iced coffee from the deli downstairs. Sarnower, already parched, depleted and wrung out at nine-thirty in the morning, eyed the container enviously.

"I got you a coffee from downstairs," she said, typing, her back still turned to him. Sarnower reached for his wallet to reimburse her.

"Don't pay me," she said turning. "Angelo gives me freebees when the boss isn't looking." She had her electric smile on. "I think he has a crush on me," she confided. Well who the fuck doesn't? Was she aware of what she did to men? He was never quite sure if she knew her own powers, but they were there all right. Today, the

heat and humidity made her glow even deeper, like an orchid. Her scent filled the work area, a combination of light perfume and her own indescribable musk. The animal kingdom transacting its business, bees, elephants, monkeys, up and down the chain. He became aware of an embarrassing erection. Over the years he was sure Nina had picked up his attraction to her, but for her own reasons, and to his gratitude, she'd never mentioned it. He drifted off into one of his lust moments. Nina turned and laughed. Shit. He must have looked like a pathetic, lovesick teenager.

"Mrs. Netherworth," she said.

"What?"

"Mrs. Netherworth is ready for you," she said gently.

There on the couch was seventy-nine year old Agnes Netherworth, here for her weekly medication check and pep talk. A recent widow, Sarnower had started her on ten milligrams of Prozac and small doses of reassurance and encouragement. The old lady had seen the moony exchange through the glass partition and was not amused. But then, ever since Sarnower had taken her on she always looked as if she'd just swallowed a lemon.

"Have fun," Nina whispered.

Once one of Boston's grandees, osteoporosis and arthritis had forced an aluminum tripod cane on Mrs. Netherworth. Sarnower went over to assist in prying her out of his deep leather couch.

"Won't you get some *real* furniture in here?" she hissed, shaking and struggling to get up like an insect pinned on its back. Sarnower noted with relief that this process had immediately deflated his erection. They walked slowly into his consulting room. Mercifully, Nina had closed the door to her office and was on the phone.

"Why do you have to keep this place so cold?"

"I'm sorry. Building management sets the temperature. I can ask Nina to call down and have them adjust it."

"No, no." She gave a vague dismissive wave with a bony hand.

"How are you sleeping and eating?" Sarnower asked after she sat down.

She looked at him as though he were kidding. "I'm not."

"Your life is much different now. Adapting to change can be very difficult."

"I don't want to adapt. I want to die."

"The medication hasn't helped to lift your mood?"

"I don't want my mood lifted. Why is it all you people want to do is lift moods?"

“You’re angry and that’s ok, it’s understandable”

“It’s not ok and it’s not understandable,” she snapped.

Sarnower took a deep breath. “Mrs. Netherworth, how can I help you?”

“I keep telling you, you can’t. You can’t! You just won’t listen to me!” She had a sharp metallic edge to her voice that made Sarnower shiver, like the scream of a cornered animal that knew it would be killed in seconds.

She started to cry. Tears were always just below the surface in the elderly. Does aging decay the inhibitory mechanisms of the brain? That fragile, brittle stoicism, shattered by a sneeze could bring on tears. Is that why the elderly became incontinent too? We start leaking all over, like battered rowboats. Good God. Getting old is not for the faint of heart his grandmother had told him from her hospital bed. At the time, as a boy, Sarnower had no idea what she meant; it sounded like a fortune cookie. Now here it was, right in front of him, like a highway sign warning of an imminent exit.

Again: when there’s nothing to say, say nothing. Simple. He let Mrs. Netherworth weep, delicately, silently, as he passed her the box of Kleenex he always kept ready. She accepted it, and pulling several tissues, began the theatrical process of blowing her nose and wiping her eyes. When she had finished, she opened her purse and stuffed the unused tissues in with the sure, staccato movements of a squirrel hiding nuts.

“Your losses must be so hard to bear,” Sarnower intoned slowly. She nodded and extracted one more tissue for a final pat down. She looked at him, sad and sagging.

“I’m sorry doctor. It wasn’t polite of me to get angry with you. I know you’re just trying to help.”

“Mrs. Netherworth, you need to get angry, you need to scream. Do it here, do it now, you won’t destroy me. Get it out.”

She looked at him and smiled faintly. “Yes...yes, I’m sure that’s what I need to do. You’re the doctor, you went to school. You must be right.”

She began to move in her seat and contemplate the mechanics of getting up. Her starched Brahmin background had years ago sealed off any hope of an expressive, emotional life with innumerable martinis, country club lunches and Sunday sermons. There must be *some* way to get through to this woman. But now she required physical assistance and Sarnower rose from his seat to help organize her departure.

The cold room had made her considerably more stiff and Sarnower could see her wince and tremble at the effort. He helped her steady herself on the cane, and when she was more or less vertical, he handed her her purse.

They walked out to the waiting room where a scruffy, T-shirted cab driver sat, waiting to drive her home. The man's gaze was firmly fixed on Nina doing her work and this made Sarnower furious.

"How did it go Mrs. N? The shrinkin' I mean," the man asked with a vulgar familiarity. Repulsed, she stiffened as he took her arm. The cabdriver turned at the door to face Sarnower. "Same time next week, eh doc?" Sarnower nodded as they left.

It was easy to understand the old woman's rage. Mounting indignities, increasing physical limitations, stupid, uncomprehending rudeness, she had to settle for less and less. Life was subtracting its gifts to her on a daily basis. One day, there'd be nothing left at all.

Sarnower was exhausted. He'd just bombed out with two patients, a pathetic start to the day. The wild shifts in environments, the heat outside and the cold air inside had thrown him badly off his game. Was that it? Something had been off, eating at him all morning, since he got up. It was too vague a feeling to pin down and now he had neither time nor energy to make the effort. Just shape up and get back on track. He had progress notes and letters to write, phone calls to return, errands to run.

There on Nina's desk was his sweating, untouched iced coffee. He grabbed the cup, tore off the lid and straw and began to chug it down in huge gulps. The coffee was watered down; the ice cubes were now the size of peas. But it was cold and wet—that was all that mattered.

Nina watched as he swallowed the drink and tossed the empty cup into the trash. "You look like you needed that," she remarked.

"I need a lot more than coffee right now."

"I'm sure," she answered cryptically.

"Who called?" he asked, gesturing to a small pile of pink message slips.

"Dr. Lane asking about Mrs. Rosten's new medication, Dr. Abravanel wondering if you can do a Grand Rounds presentation next week and Mr. Driscoll, who insisted you call him immediately."

She tapped the small pile on the desk and handed them to him. What lovely hands. Short, well trimmed nails, no polish, always the

same length. He noticed the cold had raised goose bumps on her arms producing a delicious golden fog of hair. God, I could eat her right now.

Mr. Driscoll, a.k.a. Tug. Former college roommate and partner in selected deviant and demented activities. Sarnower had made it a point to stay in touch with him over the years. Along with Nina, he was one of the few remarkable individuals he'd ever run into. Together at the University of Chicago in the mid-seventies, Tug came from a poor farming town in Iowa and prior to his matriculation had never even been to a city.

From their first class together, Tug had shown no interest whatsoever in school. He would sleep through lectures, write papers at the very last minute and forget to study for finals. Yet when he had to, he would invariably ace his courses. But by his senior year, Tug had had it with school. When Sarnower was preparing for the MEDCAT and applying to medical schools, Tug was off-campus learning futures and commodity trading, Cordon Bleu cooking and foreign auto repair. Although he never finished college, and knew nothing about business, he had started his own management consulting firm (on a drunken bet with a friend) long before that sort of thing was fashionable. This year the firm would be billing in excess of 200 million dollars worldwide.

As for speaking with Tug, Sarnower was definitely not in the mood. In retrospect, it was probably Tug's arrival late last night with a bottle of Absolut vodka and a bag of premium Columbian joints that was responsible for the morning's short-circuiting and professional meltdown. Sarnower was suddenly filled with a familiar disgust and self-loathing that had become common since Cassie's departure. His increasingly frequent forays into self-medication were starting to make inroads into the seamless functioning he took pride in, both in and outside the office. Yet at the time, imbibing and bantering well into the early morning hours with Tug, reliving college follies, listening to his running commentary on the sorry state of the pool of available single women, the whole enterprise seemed entirely reasonable.

Yet Tug himself (his nickname derived from an arcane masturbatory practice that he refused to divulge, even to Sarnower) never missed a beat. He was always at the office early and consistently got the job done. He could plow through his own psychic fog and bad weather like a polar icebreaker. Taking charge was second nature.

Once, as undergraduates, the two of them had been driving to Ribs 'N' Bibs, an open-all-night barbecue shack deep in Chicago's

South Side, one that Tug had been raving about for weeks. The neighborhood was clearly not one to be in at any time of day, much less at two or three in the morning. They had dropped Mescaline at some point earlier in the evening, and to take the rough edges off their return to reality were in the process of finishing off a sample bag of deluxe Panama Red that Tug was considering for quantity purchase and distribution to select clients.

While waxing philosophical on the fine distinctions between mesquite and teriyaki marinades, Tug had made an illegal right turn, and before they were half way down the block, a Chicago cop was on their tail. Frantic and sure they would be busted, Sarnower saw his future vanish. There would be a panicky call to his parents for bail money, a judge meting out a sentence, and an appearance before the University's disciplinary committee with certain expulsion. Tug's ancient Ford Falcon was too filled with incriminating smoke to attempt even a *pro forma* face saving.

"Chill out, man," Tug said, his mojo beginning to hum as a huge black cop sauntered slowly over to their car. He tapped the driver's window with a thick, Marine-ringed finger and gestured for Tug to roll it down.

"License and registration."

Pot fumes billowed forth as the cop told Tug to get out of the car. With more than mild annoyance, Tug unfolded his large frame out the door. The cop led him to the back of the vehicle, readying his handcuffs when Sarnower heard them starting to converse. Through the rear window, he saw Tug reach into his jacket, extract a large, foil-wrapped package and hand it to the officer who peeled back the top and began sniffing. Smiling, the cop stuffed the package in his own jacket pocket and began to unlock the single handcuff he had already applied to Tug's wrist. Eyes squinting and jaw jutting, Tug returned to the car and got in, slamming the door.

"Shit, shit, shit, fucking goddamn *Shit!*" he screamed, banging his hands on the steering wheel.

"Is he going to take us in?" Sarnower asked. Tug looked at him as if he were a retarded child. He shook his head. "My man, you have just been bailed out to the tune of \$500."

"You bribed him?"

"Let's just say the next meeting of the Chicago Police Benevolent Association is going to have a lot of very benevolent mother fucking pigs in attendance."

"Jesus. How did you know he'd..."

“Forget it, dude.”

Tug was on to his next deal.

“What did uh, Mr. Driscoll want?” Sarnower asked. A running joke, as Tug was well known to Nina, calling often and dropping by on occasion to have lunch with Sarnower. He had developed a casual, self-deprecating relationship with Nina, who thought him outrageously funny.

“Mr. Driscoll,” she italicized the words, keeping the joke going “didn’t say; only that you should call.”

Sarnower couldn’t take his eyes off her; she had never looked so desirable.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing. Why?”

“You were looking at me funny, kind of staring.”

“I’m sorry, I...I’m overloaded today. It’s nothing.”

“Ok.” She sounded wary. Good going dick-head. Be a leering pervert.

Sarnower punched Tug’s corporate number on the telephone. A cool feminine voice answered.

“The Driscoll Group. How may I direct your call?”

“Sheila? It’s Alan. Alan Sarnower.”

“Oh, Alan. How *are* you?” Sheila Townsend, Tug’s overweight and overworked receptionist was always happy to hear from him.

“I could complain but I won’t. Is he in?”

“Just a sec.”

Then: “I am making it happen, captain. I am the grease on the wheels of American business and in-dus-try. I am making the world safe for capitalism.” Ordinarily, Tug’s trademark delivery, something between a rap-artist and a carnival barker would have gotten at least a chuckle from Sarnower. Today it was just annoying.

“Dig it, man: I just did a monster contract with these venture capitalist dudes from Hungary?” Tug had the habit, when excited, of ending his sentences in the cadence of a question. “Candy from a baby. They don’t know squat. They’re gonna fly me and my entourage over, put us up in some bad-ass old castle on some damn river.”

“The Danube.”

“The what?”

“The Danube. That’s the river that runs between the ancient cities of Buda and Pest.”

“Whatever, man. You’re the one that finished college.”

“You’re the one that proved college is totally irrelevant.”

“Hey, are you listening? Five years of heavy-duty consultation fees after our tutorial. I ask you, my brother, is that *phat* or what? Shit, I’m about to cream my pants.”

Normally, Sarnower would pick up his end of the banter and there would be verbal jousting and parrying, but not today.

“Yeah, that’s great Tug.”

“Hey, you ok?”

“Just busy.”

“We’re all busy, man. You sound like a bus just ran you down.”

“That’s about how I feel.”

“That crazy-ass wife of yours come back to turn the screws?”

Over the years, Tug and Cassie had honed a casual dislike of each other into a robust hatred. Tug, who thought marriage was at best indistinguishable from a life term in maximum-security prison, had been dismayed when his best friend had been lured into a web that had put serious constraints on their high-flying adventures. Tug had never forgiven her and, Sarnower suspected, was secretly glad that she’d upped and left.

“No, she’s still MIA.”

Tug chuckled. “I can only imagine the action she’s getting.”

“Knock it off. She’s still the mother of my son.”

“My bad. Sorry. Say, I’m thinking of growing a ponytail before we head over to Transylvania. Show ‘em a little of the Wild West.”

“Get your ears and nose pierced too and you’ll be ready for a sales job at Dolce & Gabbana.”

“Cute. I think we could find you a consulting spot on one of our teams.”

“Your teams aren’t ready for the likes of me.” With the ball in play again, Sarnower’s spirits lifted. The verbal tennis matches invariably left him mildly high and very tired. There was a buzz on Tug’s line.

“I gotta go,” he said. “Don’t be surprised if me and Dom Perignon drop by for a little tête-à-tête and mix it up with a few of our Columbian friends.”

“Shit, I’m still assessing the damage from *last* night.”

“Listen, you ought to give up carbs. That’s the secret. I have and it’s changed my life.”

“*Carbs?* What do you think’s in vodka and champagne?”

“There’s *good* carbs and *bad* carbs, dude, like good cholesterol and bad cholesterol. Alcohol: good carbs. Wonderbread: bad carbs.”

“You missed your calling as a nutritionist. Anyway, Mitch will be home.”

“All the better. We can initiate him into the glories of young manhood, introduce him to some of the ancient tribal rites and customs.”

“Tug, he’s *ten*.”

“Damn! What a mellow age to sally forth into life’s glorious pleasures.”

“You’re a sick fuck, Tug.”

“I do my best, buddy.”

“Save it for your clients.”

Sarnower hung up. Ragtiming with Tug was not a priority now. Burdened with a missing wife, mounting financial obligations and dealing with a young son who was silently retreating into a dark corner left few reserves. Tug on the other hand sat cosseted in the corner office of an air-conditioned suite, in a high-rise office building downtown, feet propped up on a huge wrap-around custom made desk, winking at attractive young female associates, high-fiving and talking sports trash with his insecure male VPs and team leaders, raking in boatloads of money, keeping the whole thing just slightly off-center and unpredictable—all with the practiced, fluent moves of an experienced surgeon.

But when you stripped away the fancy office, the expensive clothes, the nervous, toadying staff that paid daily homage to their liege, at the end of the day, Tug’s riffs and charisma were pretty much all that were left, like the end of *The Wizard of Oz*: don’t pay any attention to the man behind the curtain. And he knew it.

In addition to everything else, Sarnower struggled daily to cling to the hope that at least sometimes he was doing some good, helping someone. Somehow. So much for formal education. It just made you bleed out faster.

He was about to climb into a new lust moment when Nina knocked on the door and came in. She sat down in the overstuffed chair used by patients and bent forward, elbows on her thighs and looked right at him. She said nothing, sizing him up.

“Alan...” She said tentatively.

“What is it?”

“I...I hope you won’t get angry with me. I took it on myself to cancel your patients for the rest of the day.” She took a deep breath and continued. “Forgive me for saying so, but in the past couple of days you’ve looked terrible. You haven’t been right. I’m sure it’s all that’s going on with your wife, you must be worried sick about Mitch.” She stopped to tuck wayward strands of long blond hair in

back of her ears. “Some of your patients...I don’t know, they’ve looked kind of weird, upset, after their sessions. I’ve heard you raise your voice through the wall. You’ve never done that before.”

Her hands started to fidget, and Sarnower saw tears begin to pool in her eyes.

“How long has this been going on? A week? Two?”

She nodded. Tears fell onto her dress. So he’d been losing it for longer than he thought. *That* was scary.

Then came one of those moments he’d thought about and knew was somewhere out there in space, one moment that would come down and grace him. Somehow he couldn’t put his thoughts together and found himself moving, getting up and approaching her. He pulled her up and into his arms, hugging her tightly, aware of the moment and the act only after it happened. Her confessional relief and his empathy opened a flood of tears as she tightened her arms around him. They stood like that, in silence for what seemed like minutes as Sarnower gently rubbed her back in small circular motions. The body he had wondered about for so long was suddenly flush against his. Her heat, the live, gently pulsing flesh, the dewy surface of her tear-streaked face, the smells, the citrus shampoo scent of her hair (musk in the winter for her too?), the sweet, slightly tangy aura of the day’s sweat that clung to her neck and breasts.

Floating, he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. He was getting hard again and gently began to pull away, hoping Nina hadn’t noticed the intruder between them. He held her shoulders and looked into her swollen eyes.

“It’s ok. It’s fine, really. You’re right. I do need some time away.”

She smiled. “You’re not going to fire me?”

Sarnower laughed and drew her close. “I’m going to give you a raise.” I could spend the rest of my life with this woman, he thought. This time, Nina pulled away.

“Is there anything I can do to help you? Shopping? Watching Mitch?”

“I think I’ve got that covered.”

“Since Doug and I broke up, I have time. I mean it. Anything.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, I will,” Sarnower said as she started to pull herself back together. She grabbed some tissues from the same box Mrs. Netherworth had used less than an hour earlier to help salvage the remains of her fading dignity.

Sarnower looked down. His polo shirt was wet with Nina’s tears. Her fluids, her DNA were now making a talisman of this

unlikely shirt. Should he wash it? Would she ever leave her essence on anything of his again?

And Doug. He'd completely forgotten about Doug. Doug, the perpetual graduate student of Elizabethan drama had recently been given his walking papers by Nina after several hot-blooded fights. Doug the procrastinator, Doug the deadbeat, Doug the sullen and uncommunicative. But also Doug, the great lay. Nina, in her more open and assertive moments with Sarnower had, to his squeamish discomfort, gone into specific details of their rollicking sex life together. She'd never met a man who was her sexual equal before him. He could be tender; he could be rough, and lots in between, depending on her needs, which he was somehow able to divine before she herself even knew. Once an aspiring actor, years of diction practice and an ability to get his tongue around nettlesome Shakespearean couplets apparently had paid rich dividends in the sack. For the first time in her life, Nina had become multi-orgasmic. She'd never thought herself able to achieve the kind of abandon she'd found with Doug. Their first few months together were spent almost completely in bed, but gradually she had started to want more out of the relationship; enrichment, growth, new friendships. She wanted to get established publicly as a couple, and to think about marriage.

Sarnower was uncomfortable with her confidences, but felt honored that she trusted him with her closest intimacies, as she would her girlfriends. Yes, he was jealous, almost trembling at times, as if enraged. He would spend tormented hours imagining the two of them in bed, doing the things he'd heard about in so much graphic detail, hoping to keep that part of himself hidden from Nina.

He rejoiced secretly when deep cracks formed in the relationship. Maybe Nina wasn't going to be pulled away by this guy after all. He'd seen Doug's defects well before she had, and had made subtle hints and comments to her along the way, but to no apparent effect. The one time he'd actually met Doug, tall and thin with long, stringy dark hair and the pallor of a nineteenth century consumptive, he'd been virtually catatonic. No, Nina had to find her own way out and ultimately, even the incredible sex lost its magic. Doug's inability to do more than tread water and play for time, to finish his degree, to offer Nina a life together had ultimately trumped all else. Now she was single, and he...well, what was he? Not single, separated, or divorced. Abandoned, certainly. And that could lead to what? What did he want it to lead to? Nina was right. He really did need to take the rest of the day off.