

The Three Dollar



Phoenix

The Three Dollar Phoenix

W. Sautter

Chapter I

Newark, New Jersey - 1984

"Goddamn! it", Ed yelled as he stumbled from the shower towards the phone in the bedroom.

"It never fails - probably a wrong number too". He picked up the receiver.

"Hello."

"Hello, Ed-Ed Bennett" the voice on the other end replied.

"Yes,, this is Ed Bennett."

The caller's voice sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Who is this?" he added immediately.

"Charlie Rhode" the voice said,

"Holy Christ! I haven't seen you in seven years. How the hell are you doing?"

Ed hadn't spoken to Charlie since , he had to think now, 1978. Yes, and it was June 1978 to be exact. Charlie probably didn't even remember it. He was so drunk that he could just about talk, much less remember. That was the day the Raiders drafted him.

"I read about you being traded to the Giants" said Ed.

"I thought the only things you'd be reading by now would be x-rays and stock reports", Charlie quipped.

Ed drifted back to the days when dreams of success were a common bond between him and Charlie. They had spent many nights at Terry's Tavern rehearsing the conversations they would have after Charlie made the Pros and Ed got his M.D. It seemed to Ed that he knew exactly what would be said next. It had all been said before, many years ago, at Terry's. The next line would be about meeting to talk over the old days, if he'd remembered the script right.

"How about going out for a drink , now that I'm in town, and we'll talk about old times", Charlie said.

"Somehow I thought you were going to say that". replied Ed.

"How about I meet you at Finnegan's Rainbow said Ed.

"Tomorrow night O.K.? Around nine?"

"Sounds good to me" said Charlie.

"We've got a lot of talking to do after seven years."

Ed proceeded to give Charlie directions to the place.

As Ed put down the receiver, he flashed back to all the sights and sounds of his years at Penn State. He and Charlie had some good times alright. They both pledged Kappa Delta Chi. How Ed got into that frat still puzzled him. He was a pretty good athlete but not a jock. Maybe it was because he was a real good handball player. In four years nobody ever beat him, not even All American Charlie Rode. Handball had made him a lot of friends and kept him in drinking money for four years at State. It was joked that the reason he was asked to pledge Kappa was so the brothers could get the bill of sales back for their cars from him.

"How did I first get friendly with Charlie anyway?"

mused Ed as he dried himself.

"I think it was because of old Dr. Stevens. That bastard could give a mean chemistry test. I saved Charlie's ass a couple of times in that course", thought Ed.

"That was when we first began to hang around together."

Charlie wasn't dumb. It was all that football kept him away from the books. I guess it paid off for him though. He went to the Pros like he said he would."

The next night Ed drove to Finnegan's. As his lights flashed across the neatly lined cars, he saw the license plate, ALL PRO on a blue BMW.

"That's probably Charlie's car", he thought. Ed parked his car and walked into Finnegan's. It was a large, dimly lit room. Charlie was sitting at the far end of the bar. Ed saw him immediately, he couldn't miss him.

How could anybody miss Charlie? Two hundred and forty-five pounds takes up a lot of space. Charlie looked up and caught Ed's eye. With that he instantaneously jumped to his feet and let out his old cowboy holler. The dozen or so customers sitting at the bar straightened up as if the stools had been electrified. Ed felt Charlie's powerful grasp.

"You haven't changed a bit" exclaimed Charlie, "Only a little uglier".

"You look good yourself, you two ton tub of shit", said Ed.

As the evening wore on, Ed and Charlie felt the old bonds of friendship regrew. Their conversation was a collage of old memories and old stories. It was as if time had been suspended for the past seven years.

"Last call for alcohol", came the bartender's voice. Ed glanced at his watch. Two A.M. already! it seemed like the evening had just begun and the bartender was closing up.

"Give me a call tomorrow , afternoon that is, and I'll show you around" said Ed as they walked out into the parking lot.

"I've been here two dozen times but only to play and run so to speak. Now that I'm going to be living here it would help to know where I'm going". replied Charlie.

"I'll call you about two or three".

Ed and Charlie saw each other several times the following weeks in between Charlie's practice sessions and Ed's hours at the clinic. it began to seem almost like old times all over again.

The huge gray gothic topped by dozens of fluttering red and blue flags rose out of the swamp plain. A large blue banner hung from its wall. it read "METRO STADIUM HOME OF THE GIANTS". it waved in the light breeze off the meadows. The bright afternoon sun light gave it all the appeal of an animated neon display as it gently moved. Ed pulled

into the huge, almost empty parking lot.

He shut off the car and sat motionless for a moment. He had been here hundreds of times before, but not since the stadium was built, but many years ago, when he was a kid. All this was nothing but marshes then, marshes and garbage. Thousands of sea gulls and rats lived here, all eager to attend the daily banquets brought to them by the convoy of garbage trucks moving continuously in and out of the meadows. The air was heavy with the foul odor of decaying refuse. Even now, an occasional unfavorable wind brings that same unpleasant reminder of the past up from areas further south that are not yet completely finished. As a boy Ed had been on many a treasure hunt here. He could still hear his mother's screams as he entered the house after one of those expeditions. He would have to take off his clothes on the outside porch and put them in a plastic bag to contain the gagging smell. After he showered and changed she would give him a dollar and send him to the laundry mat to wash them. Well, all that is gone now, the marshes/the garbage and most of the time the smell. Not so much as an empty beer bottle is left in view. It's all buried below where he was standing waiting for the year five thousand to become the priceless artifacts found by some lucky archaeologist. For a moment the whole thing seemed unbelievable

Ed awoke from his momentary trance, and exited the car. He walked towards a waiting security guard at the main gate: He instinctively reached for his wallet and withdrew the pass Charley had given him. As he entered the mammoth building, he could hear the echoes of a callisthenic cadence resounding through the thousands of rows of empty seats. He walked in the direction of its source. As he rounded the final turn of the maze he had been following and walked into the center of the stadium. he glanced upwards towards the rim of the

bowl like structure. The rows of vacant seats appeared to be endless in all directions. He tried to imagine how it would look four weeks from now. The Giants opened against Detroit on September 10th. It would be a sea of yelling, screaming bodies, about sixty thousand to be precise.

Out at the center of the field, he saw five neat rows of bright blue clad players, all responding in perfect unison to We instructions barked by several men whom they were facing. Ed looked for number sixty-six. That was Charlie's number. it was usually easy to spot him in a crowd. He stood out like a grizzly bear at the zoo. This time it wasn't that simple. They were all grizzlies. Ed sat down at the edge of the field by the railing and watched. He never was a football nut but he'd watch a dame now and then. it was usually a Penn State game or a pro game in which an old friend from State was playing. Three guys were in the Pros now. Buck Horn for Miami, Joe Petaliza for Dallas and of course Charlie.

Soon the lines of players separated and formed several smaller groups. Ed caught a glimpse of number sixty-six in the group closest to the far sideline. He tried to keep his eyes keyed on that number. From what he knew about football appeared to him that number sixty-six was doing a pretty good job or at least he was in on most of the Ed hoped Charlie would do well. Of course there was no reason to suspect that he wouldn't. He had been All Pro two years ago at Oakland. Ed liked the idea of having Charlie around and he didn't want to see that

About two hours passed. The hot summer Sun had moved around to where Ed was sitting and it was uncomfortable now. He wanted to move but he had to be by the entrance to the locker rooms. This was the third time he'd promised Charlie that he would be there. This time he'd made it. He had to be sure that Charlie saw him. Just then he heard a long, hard whistle sound. All the players moved

hurriedly to the center of the field. Two minutes later another loud whistle and they headed straight towards him. He saw Charlie clearly for the first time during the session. He looked even bigger than usual in full equipment. He looked at Ed and smiled.

"No emergencies at the clinic today? Wait for me. I'll be out in a few minutes", Charlie said as he disappeared under the stands towards the lockers.

Ed looked at his watch. It was 4:25. He was due at the clinic at 6:30 and that was a twenty minute drive. If the traffic was bad downtown, it could be thirty minutes or more.

In about fifteen minutes, Charlie emerged from the doors leading under the stands wearing a smile almost as broad as his shoulders.

"How'd I do?"

"Looked pretty good to me", replied Ed.

"The way things are going so far, I think I'll be here for a while ", said Charlie.

"Let me show you around this place", he said eagerly. One of Charlie's greatest assets was enthusiasm. He did everything with enthusiasm, no matter how trivial the task and when you were with him it always seemed to rub off a little. In a few moments Ed found himself a willing member of Charlie's private tour.

"This field is a miracle of modern science. Astro turf. Out in Oakland it was strictly" grass. This stuff is great. I met a guy here on the grounds crew that I knew at Oakland. He left there about four years ago to come east. His wife's mother was sick and so he had to come out. He got a job here because he had experience out there. He says even

the guys on maintenance love it. All they need is a vacuum cleaner. It really plays fine".

"Do you wanna to see the locker room?"

"You'll like the training equipment."

Charlie showed all the emotions of a kindergartner showing off his classroom. He paraded Ed through every nook and cranny of the stadium explaining each and every detail of its functioning.

Ed looked at his watch uneasily. It was 5:50 now. He had to be downtown by 6:30. Fortunately, Charlie had just about run out of superlatives and the tour was coming to an end.

Ed and Charlie emerged from the stadium into the parking lot. They walked towards their cars.

"What do you think of this baby?" Ed said as he pointed to his 1972 Chevy convertible.

"There's my Mercedes. Pretty nice for an aspiring young medicine man, huh," he added facetiously.

The car was old in years but not in appearance. It shone in the bright sun as if it were new. There wasn't a speck of rust on it anywhere.

The chrome had a mirror like luster and the interior was mint from the dash to the carpeting. Ed was particularly proud of it because to him it represented real success. Its brilliant paint and fine running engine were not the features he prized the most. It meant much more. Any M.D. four years out of med school could have a new Mercedes or Porsche but few could ever own a car like this one. This was reserved for someone who went to the ghetto in the poorest city in the country and lived the Hippocratic Oath on a daily basis.

It started about four years ago at Albert Einstein when Ed met Rita. Rita was a year behind him in med school. She was a tall, slim, black haired girl with a dark complexion. As a matter of fact, her great grandmother was Negro, Black that is. That's one of the things that helped get her into Einstein. Ethnic quotas and all. On her application she listed race as black. After all the state courts down South had just ruled that one twentieth black is considered all black. Her

features contained the most desirable of both ethnic origins and resulted in a beautiful composite.

Rita's mother was one of the original Flower Children from the sixties. She'd been at Woodstock, in Chicago in 68 and in the March on Washington in 70.. Her appearance now, according to Rita, gave no clue to her past. Feelings however, are often transmitted to offspring without overt proselytizing. and so Rita shared her mother's old sympathies.

Rita's ambitions likewise influenced Ed and his desire for monetary success was transformed into a lust for healing. Neither could remember whose idea it was first, the idea of opening a store front clinic in Newark. It was Ed though who pounded the pavements to obtain the needed financial backing. That was probably because he finished met school first. The clinic was three years old now and the car was one testament its success in Ed's mind.

it was a gift from his patients, not a fee , a gift of appreciation from people who felt a deep need to say "Thank you" for what he had done for them. Ed looked at that car as a medal for his service to his fellow man, a Nobel Prize of sorts.

As he drove across the parking !at towards the exit, Ed glanced in his rear view mirror. The stark, gray walls of the stadium loomed large in the background. It couldn't help but remind of a him of a huge decorated mausoleum.

He 'pulled onto the highway and headed south towards Newark. As he drove past the lines of stopped, overheating cars attempting to escape the city before nightfall, he thought of the day's events. He was glad that he had finally kept his promise to Charlie. It was Friday, one of the days that the clinic stayed open late. A long, hard night was ahead and his mind drifted to the schedule that awaited him.

During the next several weeks Ed and Charlie saw each other only a couple of times.

The season was in full swing and Charlie was on the road as much as he was home. Ed was busy too. The start of a new school year hundreds of kids needing shots or treatment for colds and viruses.

September slid into October. The Giants were doing well, three and one so far. Ed had seen game or two on TV. Charlie offered him tickets UD every game but that would mean an entire day and he really didn't have the time. From what he read in the paper, Charlie was doing pretty well and it looked like he would be staying.

Ed was glad of that. He liked going out for a drink together or just bullshitting, even if it was only once in a while. It took his mind off things and with Charlie he always had a few laughs.

It was late October or early November when he got the call. He couldn't remember the exact date but he did remember being at the clinic.

"How've you• been Old Buddy? Been watchin' any football lately?", the voice said. it was Charlie. He hadn't spoken to him in about three weeks.

"Not bad", replied Ed.

"Don't got much time but I did see you against Miami. Weather's pretty nice there I bet".

"Sure is ", replied Charlie.

"Ed, I want you to do me a favor".

"Sure, said Ed. He wasn't in the habit of agreeing to anything before he knew the details, but in Charlie's case it was different

"Do you remember I told you about the guy I knew in Oakland who came out here and was working at the stadium?"

"The one who's on the grounds crew?", replied Ed.

"That's right. His name is Al Druse. Did you ever meet him?", asked Charlie.

"No, but I remember you telling me about him when I came to the practice at the stadium last August".

"Well", said Charlie, "I didn't see him around

yesterday one of the other grounds guys came around to collect a few bucks from everybody for a gift for him. They said he was sick but nobody knew what was wrong with him. I called his wife to find out how he was and she didn't know what was wrong either."

"Didn't he go to the doctor?", asked Ed.

"Sure he did, and his doctor sent him to the hospital and they're not sure what's wrong. Ed r would you go down to the hospital with me and take a look at him? I don't mean go down and try to take over the case, but just go to visit and tell me what you think."

"What does Al's wife say?", asked Ed.

"She just wants to know what's the matter with him. I told her that I thought you knew your stuff and might be able to help. You did graduate from Einstein." There was a pause.

"I'll pick you up tonight, about six, O.K.?" There was another silence,

"Alright, I think I can make it. Pick me up at the clinic", said Ed.

Charlie arrived at six o'clock sharp. He pulled up and tapped his horn. Ed peered out through the window. It was difficult to see clearly. The street light in front of the of the building had been broken since June and a cold drizzle coated the pane making everything even less visible. Ed recognized the outline of the car and its burly driver behind the wheel.

"Guess you remembered how to get here alright", said Ed as he entered the car.

"It wasn't that long ago", replied Charlie. He had been to the clinic in early September and received a tour in similar detail to the one Ed had experienced at the stadium in August.

"You'll have to help me find the hospital, St. Anne's in Jersey City. The car twisted and turned

through the city streets under Charlie's control and Ed's direction.

"How did you get involved in this anyway?" asked Ed.

"Well, I was pretty friendly with Al out in California. I'd even been to his house once or twice for dinner. When I went to Oakland, he was one of the first guys I met from the east. As a matter of fact, he grew up in a town about five miles from my hometown. We even used to hang around there once in while, when I was in high school. I knew a lot of the guys he did and so we had something in common, plus he and his wife were good people.

When I called Angie, that's his wife, she was pretty upset and so I felt the least I could do is try to help out. That's when I volunteered you."

The hospital was a large , brick building, situated on a crowded street at the heart of the city. It appeared to be one of many buildings in that area whose date with the wrecking ball was long past due. It sported a small modern addition which was probably the reason for its over extended life span.

Ed and Charlie parked the car and walked towards the front doors. Inside, the ten foot ceiling made it look more like a train station than a hospital. In the center of the lobby, amidst the array of worn sofas and chairs, sat the receptionist's des. Behind it sat a heavy, middle aged, black woman equipped with a stack of five by seven file cards. Several visitors sat in small groups at the corners of the room.

"Al Druse, room 309 ", Charlie said. The woman silently shuffled through the stack for several seconds.

"No such name here" she announced.

"Are you sure?" questioned Charlie.

"Al Druse, room 309", he repeated. Again the woman searched the cards, finally holding the

file open between Drose and Dew.

"If Druse was here, he'd be right here", she said as she pointed to the vacant space in the pile. "You don't see a card there, do you?", she added.

Charlie looked at Ed with a disbelieving expression.

"I talked to Angie just yesterday and she said he was here. This is St. Anne's in Jersey City isn't it? Is there another St. Anne's in this town?"

"No, this is it" Ed replied.

"Is there a phone around here?", Charlie asked the receptionist. She gestured toward the far side of the lobby. He reached into his pocket as he moved in that direction.

"I'll be right back."

Ed sat down to await his return. He hadn't even gotten comfortable before he saw Charlie coming towards him.

"I called Angie. No answer.

"Ed walked back to desk. "Was a patient named Al Druse here during the past week?"

The woman looked up at him with a thoughtful stare.

"I think I remember that name, but I'm not sure" she said in a slow drawling voice. "We got over two hundred people here and you only remember the ones that stay for a long time or get lots of visitors. He couldn't have been one of those or I'd remember for sure but the that name sounds a little familiar."

Ed motioned to Charlie. "Let's go. I'll call the business office tomorrow and we'll find out exactly what 's going on here", he said.

Ed was on the phone to St. Anne's the next morning before he left for work. Despite his persistence, he obtained little information. Al Druse had been a patient at there for three days. He was moved to a private hospital in upstate New York on Tuesday. The reason for his move or any details of his illness where not available. Ed did find out the name of his doctor though, it was Dr. Robert Alpert, phone 693-8818.

Ed dialed the number as soon as he hung up from the hospital call.

"Dr. Abert's office", a woman's voice answered.

"Hello, this is Dr. Ed Bennett. Is Dr. Abert available?"

"I'll find out doctor" she replied.

After a brief moment, Ed was greeted pleasantly by "Hello, this is Dr. Abert speaking".

"Hello, this is Ed Bennett. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Sure", "I'm calling about one of your patients, Al Druse."

"I don't have_ a patient by that name" Abert responded instantaneously in an irritated manner. It was as if the name had suddenly changed light into darkness.

"He was hospitalized by you last week according to the business office at St. Anne's," said Ed.

There was a pause. "Well, he's not a patient of mine now" replied Apert.

There was another even longer pause. "I'll have to check my records. I'm pretty busy right now. Give my girl your number and I'll get back to you".

"Can you give me any information about.." Ed suddenly realized Apert had put the phone on hold.

"Now what is your number Dr. Bennett?" the woman's voice interrupted the silence.

Ed was puzzled as he mechanically recited his phone number. Why did Abert go from Jekyll to Hyde when he heard Druse's name? How could he not remember the name of a patient he had hospitalized only three days before? As he put down the phone, Ed stared into space. It was very strange to say+ least. Ed didn't remember the drive to work that morning. It was as if he was Captain Kirk rather than Ed Bennett and had been beamed to the clinic. During the trip, he was thinking about conversation he had just had with Alpert.

"Oh, it was a routine call about a patient and Abert would call back and that would be that" he told himself in an unconvincing manner.

He was glad that this was Rita's morning on the road, making house calls. It allowed him to answer the phone. Every time it rang he expected to hear Apert's voice. It never was. His curiosity rose with each ring.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was one o'clock now. She would be back any minute. Soon he heard the familiar sound of Sam's Caddy. Seconds later they entered. It looked like beauty and the beast. Rita's petite good looks stood in sharp contrast to those of Sam. Sam was a huge, bearded, black man with thick protruding scars on his face and upper arms. His mere presence cast an aura of intimidation.

Sam was Rita's self appointed body guard and chauffeur. It was his way of paying a debt. Sam did more than just driving her around on her calls. He was also the reason that the clinic was the only operating store front in twenty blocks that didn't need pull down window gratings or Fort Knox type security equipment. He had been Ed and Rita's "main man", as he called himself, almost since they started.

He had come stumbling through the door about three years ago. It was early on a Saturday morning and Rita had only been there about ten minutes when suddenly she heard a thud on the front window. A man was leaning against the glass and sliding towards the door. As he moved across the pane a stripe of blood traced a zigzag line behind him.

He flung the door open and stood tottering its opening. She instinctively drew back at first, but then reached towards him and guided him to a cot at the rear of the room. A large red blotch covered the upper left shoulder and arm. He spoke weakly but in a demanding tone.

"Get my arm fixed and I'll get goin'."

Rita opened the shirt to examine the wound.

"I can't just fix your arm. It's a mess. You've got to go to a hospital for this", she said.

"I don't want no hospital shit. This s is a bullet in my arm, girl. Can't you see? Hospitals mean cops and I don't need no cops in my life", he said in a loud voice as he struggled vainly to get up. It was clear that he was not going to a hospital.

Rita must have worked on his arm for two hours.

Three days later Sam got up from that cot. Rita had stayed by him for the entire time. She never told him how close he'd come but somehow he must have known. He drilled a hole in the bullet and put it on a chain around his neck for a good luck charm. Sam never told anybody how he got shot

that Friday night and no one ever dared ask. Ed thought he knew what had probably happened though. In the three years since the incident he had picked up bits and pieces from different people.

Sam was an enforcer for the drug trade or so was told. He made sure that the locals dealers didn't decide to keep some extra profits for themselves. The guy who shot him had some different ideas on free enterprise. Three months after Sam recovered, they found the guy dead of a heroin overdose. The cops never could figure out why he had injected himself through the throat with the needle.

Although Ed really never knew for sure if it was all true, things did add up. Sam dressed well, drove a year old Eldorado, always had a pocket full of money and never held a job. Rita said that every once in a while when they were making calls, he would drive to an out of the way spot, down off Feylinghesuen Ave. and meet a couple of white guys in a black Mercedes. They would talk for fifteen or twenty minutes while she waited in Sam's car. He always returned with a box of expensive cigars and a smile. She often wondered if there were really cigars in the box. She had never seen him smoke one in all the time she knew him.

Ed didn't care about Sam's sordid business affairs. All he knew is that without him things would be much tougher that they were already. Sam had laid a protective veil over the clinic and its people. He saved its life as surely as Rita had saved his. Every mugger and drug addict in the city knew him and his reputation and he knew them. The word was out, don't screw around with Sam's people.

As the two of them stood in the doorway, the phone began to ring. Ed gestured a welcome as he quickly snatched the receiver from its cradle. It was Charlie, "I just called Al's wife for the four hundredth time and I finally got her. She had been up at the hospital by Al. She said he was moved up there the day before yesterday and she tried to call me before she left but didn't get an answer. She says she doesn't understand what's going on."

"Is she home now?", asked Ed.

"Yeah, she had to come back because she couldn't afford to stay in the motel any more. She said she's going to go up on weekends if she can. She wants to talk to you" said Charlie.

"O.K., I'll go over and talk to her. What 's her address?" He hesitantly jotted it down as he hung up the

phone.

Rita had removed her coat and was beginning to fill out one of the many forms which made up the daily routine. Sam was gone. He probably went to "collect his eggs" as he put it.

"That was Charlie" he said as he looked up. "Let me tell you about what's been happening". He proceeded to explain about Charlie's call the previous evening, the trip to St. Anne's and the conversation with Apert. Rita listened intently. She agreed that some of it did seem a bit peculiar but dismissed much of it as his over active imagination.

"Do you think you can hold down the fort here for a while?" asked Ed. "I'm going to take a run over to see what Al's wife can tell me. I'd like to see her in person. I think she might need some hand holding about now".

"If it'll make you feel better then you better go. I'll be OK here", replied Rita.

Chapter II

It was an old neighborhood with well kept closely spaced two family houses shaded by an occasional tree sprouting from the sidewalk. Cars lined both sides of the street. One ninety two one ninety four, one ninety six. It was a yellow house with aluminum siding. A statute of the Virgin stood in the front surrounded by a bunch of plastic daisies. He found a parking spot, walked up the gray wooden steps to the door and rang the bell. In a few minutes the door opened. A short woman, with long brown hair and a round face greeted him in a heavy accent. He couldn't quite decide if it was Spanish or Portuguese.

"Mrs. Druse?". She nodded.

"I'm Ed Bennett, a friend of Charlie Rode ". he said.

"Dr. Bennett?", she replied.

"Yes, Charlie and I tried to see Al at St. Anne's last night".

"He's not there" she said as she turned and began to walk in to the house.

"Come on in" she shouted over she shoulder from the halfway down the hall. Ed followed her into the living room.

"Can I give you a drink?".

His host hurriedly picked up several newspapers from the floor and attempted to straighten the bunched up slip cover on an adjacent easy chair. Then she disappeared into the kitchen shouting as she did so, "A soda, beer, ice tea?"

"Soda's OK" he replied as he sat down on the sofa. He looked around the room while he waited. His eye caught several pictures, in small frames on the mantle.

They looked like children's school pictures and family snapshots. There was one that looked like a New Year's Eve picture of Al and his wife. Well, he assumed it was Al anyway. They were wearing hats and a banner in the background read "Welcome 1980"

Al's wife returned carrying a tray with two glasses of soda.

"My name's Angie", she said as she put down the tray.

"Tell me what happened to Al, Angie" he said.

Angie began to explain the events of the past several weeks. She spoke in a staccato like fashion. Her speech was punctuated by pauses during which she searched for the right words to be used in the next phrase.

"Al, she began, he didn't feel too good the week before last". She told of his beginning to feel fatigued and nauseous. Evidently, he had been feeling poorly on and off for some time. It finally came to a point where she persuaded him to see a doctor.

"We went to Dr. Apert last week. He took a lot of tests, blood and stuff". She continued, "Last week he really started to get bad, sick almost every day, so I called the doctor again and he put him in the hospital".

"Did the doctor say what was wrong with him?" asked Ed.

"He said he wasn't sure. He didn't know" she replied.

"What happened at the hospital?"

"Al was there for about three days. Then one day Dr. Apert called me. He said that he should be moved to a hospital in upstate New York. He said he knew what was wrong with Al and this hospital was the best place for him."

"Well, what was the matter with him?" asked Ed again.

"He didn't tell me. Just that he should go to this new hospital."

She paused and drew a deep breath.

"Dr. Bennett, you have to find out what's going on with my Al, she pleaded tearfully.

Al had been sent to the Caramore Clinic up around Ellensville. Ed had heard of the place but didn't know much about it. They had told Angie that he would be there for an "extended time". That was hospital lingo for not being sure when he would be released.

As he drove back towards Newark he tried to remember what he could about Caramore Clinic. He seemed to recall, reading something about it in a magazine someplace.

When Ed arrived, he was greeted by a chorus of shrill screams. He opened the door just in time to see Rita withdrawing a hypodermic needle from a three year olds bottom while the child's mother struggled to hold him still. He walked over to his desk and obviously searched through the pile of notes and messages lying there. There were about ten in all and none of them from Apert.

Rita had finished with her unappreciative patient.

"Did you ever hear of Caramore Clinic in Ellensville, New York?" he asked her.

She thought for a moment.

"Isn't that the place where they dry out movie stars and politicians?" she responded.

Ed paused, then his face lit up.

"That's it. I knew I read about it recently. I thought I read about it in a medical journal but it was one of those movie star mags in the barber shop. That was the place they put the rock group "The Slugs". All of them were druggies and they all signed up at once to get straight at Caramore. They played a concert at the place the day they were released and it made the paper and the magazine."

"Why are you interested in it?" asked Rita. That's a big money operation: It costs big bucks to stay there" she added.

"That's where they've got Al Druse, the guy Charlie and I tried to visit last night at St. Anne's. His wife just told me", replied Ed.

Why was Al in a drug rehab hospital? Angie didn't mention anything about drugs or booze, but then, of course, he didn't ask either. If he did have a habit, why didn't Apert just tell me, thought Ed? And why did somebody put him a place like Caramore that costs thousands and is all the way up in New York state and even more puzzling is who's paying for it ? It sure isn't Angie from what Ed could see.

Ed picked up the phone and dialed Apert's number.

He'd waited long enough. After a customary greeting from the receptionist, and a long pause, Apert answered.

"Dr. Bennett, I tried to reach you this morning. Your phone was busy. You were interested in Albert Druse, one of my patients. I'm sorry I couldn't talk to you yesterday but the office was very busy and this requires some time. Mr. Druse came to me last week complaining of nausea and fatigue. I sent him for several tests. Upper and lower GI, blood work, urine and so forth". Apert spoke in along string of unbroken sentences with little or no pause separating them. It sounded like a sixth grader reciting his part on the opening night of the school play.

"His condition persisted so I admitted him to St. Anne's", he continued, still in a rehearsed tone.

"How did he wind up at Caramore?" Ed interrupted.

"The second day he was at the hospital, the hospital administrator called me and said that his staff physicians had reviewed the case and decided it was best to move him up there".

"Did you request a review of the case?" asked Ed.

"No" replied Apert.

"I was told Mrs. Druse had requested that" he added.

"Did Mr. Druse have a drug problem, drugs or alcohol?"

"Not that I know of" said Apert

"May I see his records and test results? I'll get authorization form the patient's wife if you like", said Ed.

"I don't have them".

"Who does?"

"A representative from the state medical examiner's office called me the day Mr. Druse was to be moved and asked for all records"

"Isn't that a bit unusual?" asked Ed.

"Well, that's not for me to say", replied Apert. He spoke more calmly now.

"Don't you have the originals?"

"Two days after the state call me about the records, my office was robbed. I never even really got a chance to take a good look at them. I knew the patient had been removed from my care and so I didn't see any point in rushing to look at the results."

"You were robbed?" repeated Ed in a surprised voice. "Patient records were stolen?" he added.

"Some drugs and records;" said Apert.

"That's a strange combination. Why would a druggie steal patient records?" asked Ed.

"I think the drugs were a try to cover the break in. The records they took looked like somebody just took a couple of handful Is. Maybe that was because the night watchman interrupted them and they were in too much of a rush to just select the file they wanted. If the watchman hadn't come they could have just taken the one file and no one would have known until he looked for that particular file. Up until then the whole thing would have been a drug theft. If a long time passed between the robbery and the discovery of the missing file who would even relate the two?" said Apert.

"And Druse was in one of the handful Is that were taken" said Ed.

"Right. That's why when you called yesterday and asked about him it took me by surprise. That combined with all the other incidents involving this guy. I called the County Medical Association to see who you were. To be honest the whole thing is getting nerve racking. The robbery, cops, calls from the state. I didn't want to be talking to the wrong people, so I checked".

"What was wrong with Druse?" asked Ed.

"I really don't know. Like I said I never really even got a chance to look at the test results" said Apert.

As Ed ended his conversation with Apert he at least understood Apert's reluctance to talk with him the day before. The circumstances surrounding the whole situation, however had become even more perplexing.

The next day he called the state Medical Examiner's Office. He wasn't quite sure to whom he should speak. They didn't have anyone in charge of stolen records or mysteriously transferred patients. Apert wasn't sure of the title of the inspector who had picked up the papers from him, but he did remember his name, Bickford. No one named Bickford worked for the examiner's office according to them. His call to Caramore didn't help either. They said that they couldn't discuss any patients on the phone and they wouldn't even acknowledge Druse's being there. That of course, was what Ed might have expected from a high class, private rehab hospital like Caramore.

Chapter III

It was a cold, clear morning as Ed pulled up in front of 196 Selma St. He rang the bell. Within seconds Angie appeared with a small shopping bag and her purse tucked under her arm. She greeted him as she pulled the door closed behind her and rattled the handle to check its security. They got into the car and headed north towards Ellensville. It was about a two and one half hour ride ahead of them. The scenery was beautiful as they traveled up the Thruway and Angie proved to be an interesting conservationist despite her accent.

Al had been a schoolboy athlete, All-State in football. He attended college for two years but a knee injury ended any aspirations he had for the big time. His cousin in California lined up a job for him on the grounds crew at Oakland after he dropped out of college and he worked there for five years. He and Angie met out there and they were married about the time her mother got sick. She was originally from New Jersey and her mother still lived in Union City at the time. Al got the job at Giant Stadium so they could come back and help take care of her. She died shortly after they returned, about three years ago. They decided to stay here instead of going back to California. The weather isn't the best but Al liked the new job and it was too expensive to move back again.

Al's troubles began on and off about two years ago. He would get sick to his stomach and it would last for a couple of days. That happened three or four times. Angie said he had gone to the doctor when it first started. They told him he had the beginnings of a stomach ulcer. Recently, he felt sick almost every day, sick and drained out. The medicine for the ulcer didn't seem to help this time.

That's when she insisted that he go back to the doctor.

When she saw him at the hospital, last week, he said he was feeling a little better, but he had lost about fifteen pounds. She hadn't spoken to Al for a week now. His room was in a special area where phones weren't allowed, she had been told. She did write a letter though. She didn't get an answer yet.

Ellensville was a small New York town. Route 57 was its main street, lined with a quarter mile of shops and stores, a couple of gas stations and the local bank. The Catskills cradled it like huge white, snow covered hands. Caramore was at the far end of the town.

A large iron gate with the words "Caramore Clinic" formed an arch over the entrance. Attached to the gate was a high iron picket fence stretching for five hundred yards in both directions. The buildings were faintly visible in the distance. They drove to the guard house which was attended by two men wearing police like uniforms.

"We've come to visit a patient" Ed announced.

"Who's the patient?" asked the guard. "Al Druse", replied Ed. He picked up a clip board and scanned list for the name. Upon finding it, he walked to the front of the car, wrote down the license plate number and returned to Ed. "May I see your driver's license, sir?" he said. "I'll need some identification for the lady too". Ed reluctantly withdrew his wallet, removed his license and handed it to him. Angie passed over her social security card. "Please sign here", said the guard as he thrust the clip board and pen toward the open car window. "Drive straight ahead, building A-3, parking on the right", he said as they signed.

Ed rolled up the window and slowly pulled away.

"You were here last week, right?"

"Yes", replied Angie.

"Who brought you up?"

"My sister, Theresa", she said.

"Did you have to show any ID or sign anything?"

"No, they only wrote down the plate number and asked who we wanted to visit. That was all".

They parked where the guard had told them and entered A-

3. The building was old. It had to be fifty of seventy-five years old Ed estimated, but it was well cared for. The entire complex consisted of five or six closely spaced buildings of similar vintage and two newer structures, situated in a park like setting.

The inside of A-3 was completely modernized and furnished with a decorator's touch. Ed and Angie walked over to the receptionist's desk. She was a young, blonde girl in a neat white uniform, wearing a bright smile "Good morning", she sang.

"May I help you?"

"We would like to visit Al Druse".

"He's in 309 ", Angie added.

The girl typed several symbols into a computer terminal on the desk.

"I'm sorry but Mr. Druse is receiving special therapy today and visitation won't be allowed", she said in a sympathetic tone.

Ed turned toward Angie with a startled expression on his face. "Aren't your visiting hours ten to six on Saturdays and Sundays?" he snapped at the receptionist.

"That's correct, but this treatment is required on a daily basis", she responded.

"Let me see the physician in charge here, please" he said. She immediately picked up the phone.

"Please ask Dr. House to come to the lobby".

After a few minutes, a tall, dark haired man, sporting a goatee, dressed in a white lab coat appeared. "Dr. House, these people have come to see Mr. Druse in 309. I told them that he would not be receiving any visitors today because of his scheduled therapy", repeated the receptionist.

"I'm Dr. Ed Bennett and this is Mr. Druse's wife Angie. We've come 120 miles to see Mr. Druse. We were informed that visiting hours are ten to six or weekends and we're obviously disappointed. Nothing was said about therapy" Ed said as he extended his hand toward House.

"This is unfortunate", said House.

"We always like our patients to receive as many visitors as they can. You know, its good for morale. Maybe we can let you see him since you've traveled so far but I don't believe he'll be conscious", said House as he glanced down at the clip board he was holding.

"Please wait here for a minute and I'll go see if that's possible" he said while he turned and walked away.

In several minutes he appeared at the entrance of a long corridor and motioned to them. He led them towards 309.

"Mrs. Druse has asked me to examine her husband on a consulting basis", said Ed as they walked.

"She's not aware as to what is exactly the problem and it's causing her great anxiety", he added.

"As long as she agrees, we're certainly willing to share with you any information we can about Mr. Druse's condition", replied House. Angie nodded in agreement as House looked towards her.

"May I have a copy of his records?"

"Surely", said House.

They arrived at. Al's room.

It was a private, well lit place with a nice view of the mountains. Al was lying quietly, clothed in the usual white hospital pajamas. He was a large man, with dark thinning hair, a sparse mustache and a square jaw. The hollowness of his cheeks made his face appear longer than it probably was. It was hard to tell his age exactly. He looked to be somewhere between forty and fifty. Ed thought back to the New Year's picture he had seen on the mantle at Al's house. There, Al had a bushy head of black curly hair and heavy dark mustache. His face was full and he looked about thirty or thirty-five at the most. That was only three years ago, 1980.

Angie immediately moved towards him and hugged around his neck. He remained motionless. Ed moved a chair towards the edge of the bed for her to sit on.

"He'll be out for some time", said House.

"This particular treatment requires a pretty strong sedative". He hesitated for a moment.

"I'll leave you alone for a while", he said as he began to walk out the door.

Ed followed as he left. When they got into the hallway, Ed spoke.

"Excuse me, Dr. House". House stopped and turned.

"What is your diagnosis of Mr. Druse's illness?" he said in a low tone.

"Barbiturates", replied House abruptly.

"You mean drugs?"

"That's right".

"May I see the test records?" asked Ed.

"I'll give you copies of his complete file before you leave as long as Mrs. Druse signs for them" responded House.

"How did Mr. Druse wind up here from St. Anne's?", said Ed.

"It's my understanding, that his employer, not wishing to generate any adverse publicity, asked him to transfer to Caramore where we can be a little more discrete", replied House.

"You know drugs anywhere in the sports business can cause big problems and they want to keep everything clean, if they can help it. They don't want any bad PR", House continued.

"Who authorized his transfer?" asked Ed.

"Mr. Druse, of course. He signed himself out of St. Anne's and into Caramore the same day he came here"

"That's odd" thought Ed as he walked back into Al's room. Angie had no idea of Al's habit or that he was going to be transferred until after he was moved.

She was still seated next to the bed holding Al's large hand in both of her hands. He didn't stir. Ed reached over and felt his pulse. It felt slow and heavy. His arms displayed several bruise like marks where tests and injections must have been administered. It was surprising

that in such a high class institution, the nurses weren't more careful. Those kinds of marks were generally the results of poor technique. There were several similar marks on the backs of the arms and forearms. They looked like bruises that occur in old people when an overzealous helping hand grasps them too hard by the upper arm.

Not much was said during the next hour. Al continued to remain almost motionless and Angie stayed there by his side hoping for a sign of awakening. House had brought the copies that he had promised and Ed sat perusing them. They indicated routine test procedures, those that would be expected for an individual complaining of nausea and fatigue. No unusual results appeared, except of course, the positive tests for barbiturate levels. All the records pertained to tests done at Caramore. Ed had asked for all test records including those conducted at St. Anne's. House said he had requested copies from Dr. Apert but Apert had told him of the break in and that he no longer had the records. When Ed asked why copies weren't obtained directly from the hospital, House told him that the hospital said they weren't available. They gave no specific reason as to why, they just weren't.

Without those tests how did anyone know that Al was addicted unless, of course, a referring physician from St. Anne's had made such diagnosis. If that was the case who was the physician? His name should be on the admission form along with his diagnosis. It wasn't. Apert said that he didn't even get a chance to look at the test results before they were stolen. Certainly, he couldn't have been the referring doctor. When Ed confronted House with that question, he merely said that the cause for treatment was indicated on the admission form. How it was arrived at, or by whom, he didn't know. He told Ed and if he wanted more information he would have to call the admitting physician and with that House turned and walked away.

Ed looked up from the papers. It appeared that Angie realized her vigil was in vain. Reluctantly, she put his hand by his side and rose from the chair. Together she and Ed walked towards the parking lot in silence. It was a long ride home, long and quiet. The air of optimism that had existed on the way up was gone. In its place there was the knowledge that something was seriously wrong. They had ridden for at least a half hour before either spoke more than a few words.

Ed finally broke the heavy silence.

"Angie, did Al take medicine regularly for

anything?". He asked the question warily. He wanted to be sure not to evoke a reflexive denial so he didn't mention drugs point blank.

"No.", she replied.

"Al, he never even took aspirin. He always said the drug companies were a conspiracy to poison the country. You know, get everybody hooked so they could sell even more. To Al, heroin and vitamin pills were the same thing, drugs. We were constantly fighting about him taking the pills for his ulcer. It's a strange way of thinking, but that's Al. I bet they have to hold him down now to give him his medicine at the hospital".

"Was he acting any different lately. I mean mentally?" , asked Ed.

"Well, only tired out", answered Angie.

"How about groggy, like he was drunk?"

"Sometimes he'd drink a little too much wine, like at my cousin's wedding last month, but that's all, just once in a while", she replied.

"No, I mean did he ever act groggy when he wasn't drinking?"

"No, only when he drank wine".

Ed dropped Angie off and drove towards home.

"Some day off!" he thought.

He was tired from the drive, frustrated at not being able to talk to Al and more confused than ever about what was happening. Maybe he had gotten involved in something that was none of his business and he should butt out. What had started as a simple gesture of friendship to help out Charlie's friend, had become an enigmatic whirlpool. It was sucking him deeper and deeper into circumstances he somehow felt would be better left unexplored, but an inner force kept pushing him towards the eye of the turbulence. His curiosity was no longer under his own control. The whole thing had grown into an overwhelming preoccupation which dominated most of his thinking. He really couldn't extricate himself now, even if he wanted to.

When he arrived at home, he called to check out the

day's happenings at the clinic.

"This is Dr. Ed Bennett , no one is in the office now", the voice began. It was the answering machine He hung up immediately.

"She must have left early", he thought. He looked at his watch, 6:30 already. "I guess it isn't early after all". He redialed the to get the messages left on the recorder.

"Hi Ed. I left about 5:30 today. We had the usual good time today". With that greeting, Rita went on enumerate the events of the day in a chronology of patients with minor medical problems and interspersed phone messages. It was all strictly routine kind of stuff. He'd see all the details tomorrow.

"Charlie Rhode called you. He said he wanted to talk to you personally. Left no message except that he would call back", said the recording.

"Charlie's on the road this week. I wonder why he called from Dallas. It must be important", thought Ed. It couldn't be a social call. When Charlie plays a game he gets so pumped that he doesn't think about anything but football, certainly not trivial bull shit.

Ed put down the phone after the last message had been delivered. He went over and sat on the bed next to his briefcase and withdrew the photocopies that had been given to him by House. He started to read the test results for the third time. Again everything appeared as it did before. Nothing seemed usual.

Ed recalled his conversation with House about the missing test results from St. Anne's and the apparent inconsistency of admitting Al as a drug rehab patient with no prior indicative test results and no referring physician's diagnosis. House said the admitting physician would be able to clear all of that up for him. Ed scanned the forms for the name. The signature was unclear but it looked like McCarthy. He'd call tomorrow. He had a lot of paper work to do that night, but he didn't seem to get much of it done. Every time he began, he found himself rehashing the past several weeks over in his mind.

The next day began as usual. He arrived at the clinic at 8:00. Lucky was waiting at the door as he unlocked it.

"Hold on boy, I'll have this open in a minute".

As the door swung open, a large black and white dog bounded through the entrance. He looked to be half German Shepherd, half Doberman with a little bit of Collie and Boxer thrown in.

"Take it easy", yelled Ed while attempting to calm the exuberant animal.

Lucky was Rita's dog. She picked him up the same way she befriended Sam. She found him limping down the alley between the clinic and the next door building. He was rummaging through the garbage looking for what he hoped would be his first meal in days. His hip bones protruded prominently through his shabby fur as did his ribs and shoulders. When he turned and looked at her with his sad brown eyes, Rita saw Pepper reincarnated. Pepper was her dog when she was a child. Lucky and Pepper both came from the same non-aristocratic lineage.

That one soulful glance and Rita turned and walked across the street to Bill's and bought a bologna sandwich. She returned shortly to Lucky still rummaging unsuccessfully.

"Here boy. Here's something for you", she called as she unwrapped the sandwich and placed it on the ground. She stepped back several feet and waited. The aroma of fresh cut bologna finally reached him and he warily began to move forward towards its source. When he reached it, he instantaneously devoured the morsel with three rapid gulps.

Rita looked more closely at the right rear leg. A large oozing sore spread over the entire flank.

"Here Lucky", she continued to coax him towards the clinic entrance and he anticipating more reward, eagerly followed. When they entered, she shouted to Ed "Look what I found. This is Lucky".

"How do you know that's his real name? Maybe he's a fugitive from the dog pound and he gave you alias", replied Ed as he looked the dog over. That day Rita made a life long friend and the clinic got a damn good watch dog.

Ed settled the dog, walked over to his desk and sat down. In a few minutes the phone began to ring and patients started to flow in and, out of the office in a slow but

steady stream. In between the calls and patients he tried to whittle down the stack of paperwork that covered his desk. It was business as usual. It was around noontime when the telephone rang for the twentieth time that morning. Ed answered it to hear the familiar sound of Charlie's voice.

"Ed, I've been trying to get you for two days now", Charlie said in a relieved tone.

"Rita left a message that you called yesterday and it sounded important. Aren't you in Dallas? Don't you have a game today?" replied Ed.

"I'm in Dallas, alright. I want to have a long talk with you but this phone call will have to do for now". He paused for a moment as to collect his thoughts.

"Yesterday morning, before we left, I got a message from the front office. They wanted to see me. I went up and when I walked in, they're five guys, in suits and ties, executive types and the owner, John Sims, all waitin' for me. Everybody's real nice, asking me how I like playing for the Giants and how I like the east coast and New York City and so forth. Now I know this is no social, let's get acquainted meeting. Then out it comes. One of them says 'Do you know Ed Bennett?'. That kinda took me by surprise, your name being mentioned out of the clear blue like that. 'Of course' I said. Then another one of them said 'We're a little concerned about you hanging around with this Bennett'. I immediately asked him why, and then a third guy said that you're involved with drugs and it's a bad association for members of the Giants to be seen with drug dealers".

"What!", exclaimed Ed.

"You are kidding, aren't you?"

He knew that there was no kidding going on here.

Charlie liked practical jokes, but this was far from a joking matter. Besides, he wouldn't have called twice all the way from Dallas, just before a game, unless it was pretty serious stuff. He would never joke about something like this.

"I told them they must have the wrong Bennett", Charlie continued.

"But they knew all about you, about the clinic and

they mentioned a guy named Sam. They said he was your distributor and strong arm man.

"This is incredible" interjected Ed.

"Then Mr. Sims chimed in and said want you to stop associating with Bennett. We can't afford bad PR here. We're trying to give you some good advice before a problem develops. With that they all got up and thanked me for my understanding shook my hand and said goodbye. I walked out dazed. I still am."

"What else was said?" asked Ed.

"That was about it. I've been going over and over this in my head for two days now and that's the whole story" replied Charlie.

"Do you know who the five guys are?"

"Well , Sims introduced me to them, but I'm not good at remembering names. I tried to remember them after I left but I can only come up with two of them, a Mr. Harb and a Mr. Sonetti. Another one's name might have been Sloan, but I'm not sure", said Charlie.

"Did Sims say who they were, I mean what their positions were?"

"No", replied Charlie.

"I don `t understand any of this. You know me. I was never involved with drugs. Maybe a little grass now and then but that's about it. Even at State some of the guys used to do a little coke and pills and you know I never took any of that stuff. I had dozens of opportunities", said Ed.

"I know, you were one of the straightest guys In the whole place responded Charlie, "I tried to tell them that they didn't listen".

"I'm going to have to find out what's going on here", said Ed.

"I had to call and tell you this. I was so dumbfounded by the whole thing that I just had to tell you right away. I was hopin' that you had some explanation", said Charlie.

"Well, I don't. Call me when you get back and we'll

go over this again. There must be some mistake", said Ed.

He hung up the phone in slow motion.

"Drug dealer? Me?" he thought, "It's all insane".

This was the second time in two days that someone had been accused of involvement with drugs. First Al and now him. It was all very hard to deal with. It seemed to Ed that the two circumstances might be related. If not, it was very coincidental that two innocent people suddenly became drug suspects.

Ed made two phone calls the next afternoon, one to Caramore and one to the Giants' head office. No one at Caramore ever heard of Dr. McCarthy and no one knew who Al Druse's admitting physician was.

When he tried to contact Sims, he got the usual secretarial run around with the promise of a return call. When he left the clinic at 6:30, no return call had been received yet.