

PROVENANCE

Chapter One

The Provenance, October 13th, 11:45 a.m.

A rendering of the building had been set in the corner of a plywood wall that separated the vast construction site from the city. Six feet tall and eight feet long, it showed a space age blue, block-square complex soaring forty stories into the background of a cloudless sunny sky. The building corners were rounded, the glass tinted so that it was impossible to tell where the building materials left off and the heavens began. Ground level featured dramatic setbacks and sculpted public gardens. The sign announced "THE PROVENANCE; site of the world's largest luxury condominium complex." The complex boasted a self-contained spa, Olympic-size pool, weight room, tanning salons, a parking garage and even an International Boutique Shopping Area for the "Perfect Vacation at Home."

The complex was a hole in the ground.

Supervisor's Office 11:45

Building Supervisor, Lou Zhornick, was a short, ruddy, bull of a man, with a curly pelt of salt and pepper hair that hugged his square head like a cap. He had a loud voice and immense energy. His surprisingly blue eyes snapped with intelligence and authority. He wore his leadership like an aura.

Zhornick had learned early that what people valued most about him was that he got the job done. No matter what it took, no matter what he had to do, he got the job done. That had been how he had survived as a kid and the pattern had stood him in good stead as an adult. His old fashioned father, determined to put spine in his brood, had strapped any kid in his large immigrant family who said, "I can't." Lou got strapped least of all.

"Get the job done," was Lou's First Rule Of Survival In The Construction Industry.

It had been his reputation for inspiring speed in his workers that had impressed the owners of The Provenance, the future behemoth high-rise project on Second Avenue. They had recruited him to be their new building supervisor. They needed someone to drive the project and he was their choice.

When they had brought Lou Zhornick on board, the project had been in the early stages of excavation. The owners had hit one snag after another. They were already three months behind

schedule and several hundred thousand dollars over budget. Lou Zhornick was to be their savior. Within weeks he had begun to perform his miracles. He was under the gun and saying, "Get the job done!" louder than ever.

Among his men, Lou Zhornick had the nickname, "Shortcut." They loved him for it. It meant that no one was looking over their shoulders all the time. As long as they got the work done and it looked okay, it was good enough for Lou. There was something deeply satisfying about pure bull and jamming, even if customers sometimes complained that their kitchen cabinets fell off the walls, and that there were holes in closets big enough for cats to crawl into.

On Thursday, when half the rods for the reinforced concrete walls had come in short, he ignored the problem and installed the defective rods along one small section of the Second Avenue rim. It had gotten the job done, but had effectively weakened the structure. Lou had given it some thought before he made the decision. He did the math and figured that the only way the change in building plans would become evident was if tons of stress was placed against the outside of the weakened walls. There was actually only one segment of the foundation that was truly vulnerable, a short segment of wall where he had completely run out of the longer rods. It would have been better if he had noticed the shortage earlier, he thought, feeling his temper rise like blood pressure. That way he could have staggered the short rods throughout the wall instead of concentrating them in one place, but who had time to notice much of anything in the crisis that had become his responsibility.

Zhornick shrugged. What could possibly go wrong? Thank God architects always built redundancy into their plans. Redundancy took time and money and Lou Zhornick had leeway for neither. As he made his calculations he was secretly saying a little prayer of thanks to the Patron Saint of Redundancy.

Lou was good at praising speed and problem solving. He was murder when there were delays. He was not particular about rules being followed either. "Rules are made to be broken," was Lou Zhornick's Third Rule of Survival in the Construction Business, right after, "Have someone handy to pin the blame on if something goes wrong," which was his Second Rule. "There's thousands of rules being broken at thousands of sites around New York," he was fond of reminding his men. "So who's lookin'?" was one of his favorite questions.

A case in point had been his compliance with safety regulations regarding pedestrian access to sidewalks passing under heavy equipment. When it seemed he'd need three men to build a small fence, and he found he couldn't spare them, he ignored the regulation. The fence was

supposed to block pedestrian traffic from the sidewalk between the excavation pit and the new building crane they had erected on Second Avenue late the previous afternoon. It could wait.

A delivery truck arrived. Lou needed the men to off-load supplies. He had his priorities straight – supplies were necessary, overtime was not. Protective plywood fences could wait. He could deal with the problem later. They could easily put up sawhorses to keep the damned pedestrians away. Lou muttered under his breath as he walked to his office trailer, "Stupid people, walking around construction sites, craning to see what was going on in a big, empty hole. If they wouldn't walk under a simple ladder for fear of bad luck, why would they walk under a 35-ton building crane hefting a half-ton of steel girders directly over their heads? Who was kidding who?" The phone rang and Lou forgot to order the sawhorses.

"Keep the men happy," was Sub-Section "A" of Rule Number One of the Lou Zhornick Code of Survival in the Construction Business. Lunchtime was important to the men on the shift and Lou always released his men on time for their break. The last thing he needed was union trouble on a job that was already substantially behind schedule.

Today he had a problem. The truck with framing girders came ten minutes before noon. Lou was royally pissed. He had a deliveryman working on the clock and his crew was already at lunch. He tried to talk the driver into taking his lunch at noon with the men, but Eddie Bosche would have none of it. Bosche claimed he was behind schedule himself and needed his truck off-loaded before two. Lou looked around for Joe Zabiglione but the crane operator was nowhere to be found. Bill Arthur said Joe had left a few seconds earlier to take a leak before break. Lou felt the blood flood his face, why couldn't the son of a bitch take a piss on his own time?

"I guess he had to go," Bill Arthur said with a shrug.

Joe Zabiglione 11:45 a.m.

Joe Zabiglione never gave a second thought about his habit of leaving the keys in his rig. He always left his keys in his rig. If he had been asked why, which had never happened in the twenty years he'd been on the job, he would have replied, "Who the hell's gonna move a fuckin' 35-ton crane with 140-feet of steel boom attached to it?" He would then have taken off his hard hat and scratched his head, as was his custom when pretending to think. But someone did want to move his 35-ton building crane. Someone wanted to use his rig very much.

Earl 11:46 a.m.

Earl Latimore, tall, slender, handsome, with chocolate skin and large brown eyes, looked more like a college student than a day laborer. He had been hanging around looking for work for days. He had the feeling that if he could only hold out, if he could only manage to stay visible, this guy "Shortcut" Zhornick would give him work. He'd heard a lot about Lou Zhornick bending rules. He was waiting.

It seemed he'd been waiting for a break all his life. If Lou would bend one rule for him maybe afterward he could be made to circumvent the grandfather clauses that stood between Earl, licensing and a job that paid real money. Maybe he could get his chance. Shit, he'd do anything for a chance.

Lou Zhornick 11:46 a.m.

"Where's that black kid always askin' for work?" Lou Zhornick asked, looking at the pile of girders on the truck.

He spotted Earl leaning patiently against the south wall of his office.

"Hey kid! Yeah you. You wanna job 'a work?" Lou shouted.

"You kiddin', Man? Jus' you lead me to it," Earl grinned, his white teeth flashing in his handsome ebony face.

"If I remember correctly, you said you drive heavy equipment," Lou put a companionable hand on Earl's shoulder.

"Yes, suh," Earl responded eagerly. Lou liked the young man. He seemed eager and he was polite. Not uppity like some he'd seen on the jobs.

"Ever worked a crane before?"

"Yes, suh, Sea Bees," was Earl's quick response.

"Good. Move them girders from that truck to the floor by that wall over there. Do it before the regular driver gets back and I'll pay you double for the hour and give you somethin' steady." Lou spoke the magic words. He wasn't certain he meant them, getting the kid steady work could be more trouble than it was worth, but they sounded good and they had an immediate effect on the kid.

"Consider it done," Earl's grin spread from ear to ear. He looked at his watch. Before the end of the lunch hour wouldn't give him much time. He'd have to make the payloads pretty heavy to move all the girders in only one hour.

"Just get the job done!" Earl knew the First Rule in Lou Zhornick's Code of Survival in the Construction Business by heart. Because he knew the rule, he didn't mention the fact that he couldn't get a license. 'An', he thought happily, 'the Man didn' ax.' Any other contractor would have been looking for paper. Paper was Earl Latimore's problem.

Everybody knew about the Catch 22 in New York, first you get the job, then you get the license. You can't get the job without the license and his Discharge stood like the Great Wall of China between Earl, licenses and construction jobs. If the Man knew all about Catch 22, and he didn't ask about the license, then the Man didn't want to know about anything except getting the job done. Today Earl would get the job done. Lou could help him hassle the licensing bureau later.

Joyously Earl sat himself in the driver's seat of the giant crane. The keys were in the ignition, Lou must have asked the regular driver to leave them. Earl's hands reached toward those keys as if they were the Holy Grail. He knew he was a good crane operator, the best. Now he had his chance to prove it. Skillfully he began the process of getting the job done.

Danielle 12:05

Danielle Danforth, her short brown hair ruffled by the slight breeze that funneled through the deep canyons between New York's tall buildings, had slowed her walk to a stroll. She couldn't resist the sun, even when pressured by the urgent need to return to the office while the terms of her last meeting were still fresh in her mind. Cat-like, she stretched her neck to let her face catch the last autumn rays. Soon enough it would be winter and she would have to pull herself in to conserve heat.

The promise of winter was all around her. The sun wasn't warm. There was a nip in the air that brought with it a feeling of gratitude for her down coat. She had elected to wear it when she left her brownstone earlier that morning. Her years of living against the weather in Vermont had trained her never to take weather for granted.

Danielle's mind jumped from the contract to a non sequitur. Maybe this year she'd go back to Aspen or Tahoe. The girls would like that after the ice, rocks and lift lines of the northeast. Her face softened as she visualized Brooke and Stacey's little faces laughing against the snow. To tell the truth, she'd like it too. She'd love it. She hadn't been out west since the winter before Mark died.

Strange, she had tried so hard to keep life the same since Mark had gone, but she had missed taking a trip west for skiing in powder. Perhaps thinking and planning a skiing vacation like this meant she was coming alive again. She hoped so.

She frowned slightly, the creases marring her otherwise perfect skin. Danielle was habitually hard on herself. Disciplined, organized, successful, she gave herself small margins for errant thoughts about winter vacations.

Ahead of her a giant crane squatted like a graceless Brontosaurus beside a sidewalk cluttered with pipes, culverts, beams and tubes; the assorted detritus of the building trade. Instinctively she slowed her pace.

"Never walk under a ladder," her mother's carping voice cautioned like a recording in her head.

"It's not a ladder, it's a crane," Danielle's mind argued back. Such a threatened woman, Fiona McCarthy, always predicting doom and gloom.

"It doesn't look safe to me," Fiona's querulous voice persisted. How the hell had her mother's voice taken such root in her head? Early childhood programming was such a bitch!

"If it wasn't safe someone would have blocked it off," Danielle settled the argument in her mind. Later she would wonder if she had chosen to walk under the crane because Fiona's voice had argued so strongly against it.

"A stitch in time saves..."

"Oh shut up!" Danielle forced the points she must include in her new contract proposal to the front of her mind. Early in her life she had discovered that she could only focus on one thing at a time, and that business was the great weapon for peace. Business always seemed to quiet Fiona's strident voice. Sometimes Danielle wondered if she was crazy. Fiona had been certifiable. Maybe insanity ran in the family.

Sylvia 12:05 p.m.

Ahead of Danielle, Sylvia Sabartini, her long braid of thick black hair swinging down her back, was humming her favorite few notes from Verdi's La Traviata as she strode under the crane. Grand Opera, she had discovered, was generally marvelous and occasionally sublime. Once in a while she found a few notes of a musical line that were so outstanding that she waited through an entire production to savor them. Those were the musical moments she went to hear. The way other sopranos performed her favorite moments was her measure of their talent.

Behind Sylvia, the crane lifted its heavy load of steel from the flat bed of a parked truck and slowly began a swing that would carry its awkward cargo across the sidewalk before lowering the thick, heavy girders into the excavation pit.

Sylvia's black eyes caught the shadow of steel passing over her head, as the bulk of the freight momentarily blocked the sun. Instinctively she quickened her pace. Much later she would say that the shadow, like the specter of a giant bird of prey converging on a rabbit, had been the warning of impending danger that had saved her life.

Jane 12:05 p.m.

Behind Danielle, Jane Ackerman pushed her thick glasses up the ridge of her nose as she stopped to watch the crane hoist its massive load and begin its swing across the sidewalk. How the hell could the crane lift so much steel at once, she wondered? It looked like an excessively large load, but what did she know?

In actuality, Jane had been fascinated by heavy equipment all her life and she knew a surprising amount about the business. She guessed that if she hadn't been a woman she might have tried to be a crane operator. Maybe it wasn't the fact that she was a woman that had kept her from pursuing heavy equipment. After all, she was an EMT, and when she'd started doing that, women hadn't exactly been standing in line to staff ambulances. She tended to blame a lot of things she hadn't yet tried on the limitations of being a woman.

Jane firmly believed that she lived in a society that held a dichotomous view of womanpower. She was never sure whether it was the limits of society, or women's beliefs in the limits imposed by society, which kept them from successfully pursuing male-dominated work, but she supposed that didn't matter. In Jane's mind reality and perceived reality were much the same thing.

Jane was curious about the picture unfolding before her. Never before had she been able to see a crane actually work over a sidewalk. In the past the sight had been blocked off to pedestrian traffic by plywood barriers. It didn't register that her ability to see what was happening was due to a threatening lack of protection forgotten in the hurried morning schedule. She did not think to question the fact that the sidewalk was completely open to pedestrians. What she was watching was much too interesting for her to step aside and contemplate how unusual it was for her to be able to see it.

With rapt attention, step by curious step, she was drawn closer to the edge of the excavation. Each step gave her a better view of the intricacies of the process of crane operation. She was mesmerized by the way the driver used his dark hands on the levers. He was a master. It was almost like watching a ballet.

NYC Ambulance 474 12:05 p.m.

Laurie Higgins pulled the unit up to a fire hydrant space near the corner of 86th and Lexington. William Russo hopped out and ran to the corner deli. He cut to the head of the line and bought a ham on rye – heavy on the mustard, and a tuna on Wonder Bread – lots of mayo. He added a Power Bar, a Twinkie and two cups of coffee, one black, the other with lots of cream and four sugars.

"How can you eat that shit?" he asked, handing Laurie the Tuna, the Twinkie and the sweet, creamy coffee.

"I like scraping congealed bread off the roof of my mouth," she retorted, her mouth already filled with the creamy goo.

William shook his head and smiled. They had this same conversation almost every day. Her capacity to eat disgusting tuna sandwiches and Twinkies were two of the things William most loved about Laurie.

He opened his bit of health, began to push the food into his mouth and waited for the next call to come over the radio. Ambulance personnel learned to eat fast and whenever they got the chance. They lived with interrupted meals and indigestion.

Emergency Department Bellevue Hospital 12:05 p.m.

As Michael Rothman, M.D. stitched a lacerated finger in the surgery cubicle, he mentally grumbled about the fact that little lacerations were a terrible waste of his surgical talents. When he had selected surgery as a specialty, he had thought that every waking moment would be an adrenaline rush. He had never expected to spend most of his life battling drudgery. He was addicted to adrenaline and found himself wishing that something thrilling would come in over the radio so that he could stop making busy work and really be useful. He was bored and restless and wanted some action.

As he finished placing the last of the stitches in the laceration, he looked around to see which of the nurses was around. If he couldn't have action of one kind maybe he'd get action of another.

Earl 12:05

Happiness was a palpable aura radiating around Earl as he worked the controls of the giant crane. He whistled under his breath. After this they'd have to give him his license and a job. If he had a real job that paid real money he and Tamara could get married. The man had said he'd get work if he moved those girders. Doing an impossible job for a man who respected achieving the impossible above all else would overcome everything that had stood in his way for so long. The man had no curiosity at all beyond getting the job done.

Earl's mouth pulled into a scowl as his memories stole the happiness from the moment. All that Dishonorable Discharge stuff had been unfair anyway. Sometimes he felt as if God had it in for him. Shit, all he'd ever wanted was a chance to prove how good he was. Well here it was at last, a lucky break.

Earl pulled the levers to lift the load of girders and felt the crane respond sluggishly to his touch. He knew he was seriously overloaded, but what the hell, he had a deadline to meet.

Deadlines to meet and jobs to be got, it sounded like a poem, maybe a poem by Robert Frost; Robert Frost Latimore. Maybe he'd name his first son Robert. Nice name. Or maybe he'd name him Work. Work. A fine name. That was the name of life's game. He'd teach him early. His bitter sister was dead wrong, damn her. He would get out of the Ghetto.

Second Avenue 12:05 p.m.

Six feet below the sidewalk a water main that had been installed near the turn of the century, felt the weight of the crane pushing against its sides. The main had been eroded over the years, its tensile strength reduced to a thread by the persistent washing against it. For the moment it held. But here and there microscopic cracks appeared in the smooth metal surface, a promise of damage to come.

Lou 12:06 p.m.

Lou Zhornick had spent the past half hour on the phone. Son of a bitching Unions always came up with their demands when he had tight deadlines to meet. The thought had him in a rage.

Somebody from the job must have called them. The fuckers knew he was behind schedule, knew he was between a rock and a hard place, knew that this was the time to push for concessions.

Lou had become so involved with his new crisis that he had forgotten about the crane working illegally over the unprotected sidewalk high above him. He had a nagging feeling there was something he'd forgotten, something important he should have done, but he couldn't for the life of him remember what it was. All he could think about was the major work stoppage that loomed on the horizon. To meet the goals he had been hired to achieve he simply could not afford to lose one damned hour from his work schedule.

Provenance Excavation 12:07 p.m.

The crane swung its load across the sidewalk and began lowering the mass of girders toward the bottom of the excavation site. The weight of the boom and the heavy material it carried rested fully on the wheels and bracing feet closest to the excavation pit.

Below those bracing feet, microscopic cracks appeared in the sidewalk. Near the excavation pit, compressed earth began to bulge with the weight of the overload. The areas of weakness just above the concrete wall, which had not been reinforced because of those short rods, delivered erroneously to the site weeks before, began to displace outward.

Just as Lou Zhornick could not conceive of losing one hour from his work schedule, so had Lou Zhornick been unable to conceive that 35-tons of lateral pressure would ever be exerted against the walls of his excavation pit before cross beam support had been installed to offset the below-standard workmanship. Now the things that Lou Zhornick had been unable to imagine were about to become his reality.

With a sound like a cannon shot, the walls burst and a seam of compressed earth spewed from behind the cement just below the feet of the crane. The sound of disaster, like a cannon in a small room, was followed by an intense silence. In the distance it was possible to hear the background noise of traffic, wheels on tarmac, impatient horns. At the building site it was as still as a forest, as calm as the sea before a storm.

Everyone who heard the sound searched for its source and found nothing immediately threatening. An eternity of minutes later, groaning like a wounded prehistoric animal, the crane slowly began to tilt over onto its side. It started in slow motion and gathered speed as gravity exercised its inevitable pull on the unbalanced behemoth.

Inside the Excavation Pit 12:07 p.m.

When the wall let go, the boom of the crane was almost at its off-loading point. Weighted by its load, and because of its position deep in the excavation pit, the boom hit bottom before the crane body came to rest on the pavement high above. For endless seconds the top of the boom drove into the cement floor. Metal on concrete screamed like a thousand fingernails dragging across a blackboard. The fingernail sound was quickly replaced by a deeply pitched scream as the 35 ton monster adjusted to the sudden stop through all its myriad joints and connections.

It had been a miracle that the boom had not slit out from under itself in the vastness of the pit. If it had not landed point first, and imbedded itself deeply into the concrete floor, nothing would have prevented the crane from toppling the rest of the way into the pit. If the boom had let go there was nothing to stop it from sliding all the way to the far wall of the block-square hole. Without the support of the boom, the body of the crane would tumble the rest of the way into the pit taking the remains of the sidewalk with it. Earl Latimore would certainly have been crushed as the crane landed cab first on the cement pad 30 feet below street level. Danielle Danforth, Jane Ackerman and Sylvia Sabartini would have been spilled into the depths of the pit to face varying degrees of injury or painful death. Four lives depended on a trembling arm of steel buried six inches deep into the floor of the future building.

For a moment, its momentum halted, the boom bowed with the tension, threatening to shake itself out of its sudden stop. There was utter silence in the pit as the boom quivered with unspent energy.

Like the motions of a burrowing animal, the quivering followed the fault lines in the cement, driving the top of the boom deeper into the reinforced concrete until its energy had been spent and it finally came to rest standing awkwardly on its rigid neck. Welded together, the boom and the cement floor were all that stood between Danielle, Earl, Jane, Sylvia and total disaster.

Danielle 12:07 p.m.

Danielle's first awareness of impending disaster was auditory. She could not identify the source of the cannon shot, but she could hear the earth moving before she felt the sidewalk heave beneath her feet. Instinctively she ran forward, her athlete's body carrying her away from the perceived source of danger.

Her quick move saved her life. Seconds after she dove toward safety, the thick base end of the boom slammed into the sidewalk where she had been walking. But, even with those quick

reflexes, her actions were not enough. As the sidewalk bucked and danced beneath her feet, Danielle tripped, sprawling under the body of the toppling crane. The slope of the sidewalk flipped her up and around, throwing her back under the cab and twisting her body so that her head now pointed in the direction of the pit.

As more dirt was pushed from beneath the sagging sidewalk, by the weight of the settling crane, Danielle started to slide headfirst into the thirty-foot drop just beyond her head. The terror of her scream was lost in the far greater noise of the boom connecting with the floor of the excavation pit and the sound of tearing steel as the crane settled into its own weight.

Danielle was unaware that the buckling sidewalk, which was creating her inexorable slide toward the thirty-foot drop, had saved her from a new peril. With only inches to spare, her slender body slipped out from under the massive wheels that threatened to crush her chest, her abdomen, and her hips. She might be dropped on her head, but she would not be crushed.

The nails in Danielle's desperate fingers tore to the quick as they sought purchase in the bucking cement, but she felt no pain. Neither did she feel pain when the sheet metal that comprised the crane's giant fenders, the most prominent part of its anatomy, grabbed her across her thighs, pinning her to the sidewalk, stopping her downward plunge, and simultaneously crushing the large bones in each of her thighs into multiple fragments.

At precisely that moment, the boom dug into the floor of the pit. This quivering, tentative halt stopped the full weight of the crane from spontaneously amputating Danielle's legs above the knees. Now she lay on the rim of the pit, head slightly down, safe, hurt and fully trapped by 35 tons of unstable metal.

The sidewalk, mutilated by millions of cracks in every direction around her, was holding by dint of a few pieces of wood and a minor miracle that no one in the city or building crew had been aware existed. The wood, the vestige of support scaffolding, had been scheduled to be removed when the next stage of building was undertaken. It was a matter of timing that had kept it in the right place to prevent Danielle's final tumble into the pit. The unknown miracle was that thirty years earlier, a frustrated owner-contractor, in an effort to prevent frost heaves, and limit his recurring maintenance problems, had laid a tough layer of steel netting into the new concrete he was pouring to replace the sidewalk in front of his building. The steel netting, resting against the remains of scaffolding, now held the sidewalk in one piece, preventing it from splintering into bits and dropping Danielle into the pit.

At the moment, Danielle was unaware of the miracle. As the bones in her thighs fractured under the weight of the fenders, she lost consciousness. She was in another time, another place. Another world.

Chapter Two

Danielle 1952

At first she drifted in soft water, aware of him, not yet in communication. Gravity was exhausting enough.

One day she reached out with her thoughts and found him. "Hello," she thought in greeting, the way such greetings were given in that other space.

"Hello, I'm here," was returned with a smile attached.

Once, when she was no bigger than a walnut, she stretched out the cells that would become her legs and found him with her tiny unformed foot. She liked touching him, liked having something to touch, liked being touched. Touching was something that separated this new existence from that other place. She had the sudden thought that she would never get enough of it. The thought worried her.

She reached out with her mind in the old way; the way all souls communicate when they are not part of a planetary illusion, and felt their timeless connection. She liked having him there, sharing her new adventure. It made her less apprehensive. With him in her life she knew she would never be alone. Without him she might not want to try it. She dreaded the unknown.

She liked hearing his beat so much faster than that other omnipresent pulse. Both beats, and the sway of the soft water that supported her, defined her life.

It seemed only a short drifting of time before the container grew small and they began to press in on each other. She no longer had to reach out to find him in the once vast space. They were pressed heart to heart, feeling the pulse of each other's lives, speaking mind to mind.

* * *

He was having difficulty. She could sense it in his heartbeat and the way he moved against her. She could feel it in his cord where it lay between them. He released matter into the clear warm water of their sack and it became dense. She felt powerless to help him as he struggled to retain his hold on life.

"Are you all right?" she telegraphed in the way that was not words but was completely understood.

"I don't think so," he responded. "I don't think this form is going to make it."

"Don't leave me," she begged. "I'm afraid to be alone."

"I may not be able to come along," he responded weakly, "Don't worry, we'll be together again as we have always been."

"Please don't leave me," she pleaded.

He did not respond.

She had an idea.

"If we can get out of here early perhaps you will be all right," she communicated.

"No. It's too soon." He felt exhausted. Birth was beyond him.

"We have to get out of here!" she telegraphed urgently to their container urging it to release the enzymes they would need to exit the womb.

* * *

"Don't worry, Fiona," Howard Goldsmith soothed. "We'll try DES. It's been reported to be very helpful in stopping premature onset of labor. We also want you to rest a lot. Don't exert yourself."

* * *

She was growing so big she could no longer move in the container. Strange forces were working on her. The walls of the container no longer simply held her, they pushed at her. Something was happening. It was not a matter of her growing larger, the walls were actively shrinking. She was frightened. She felt a great need to escape. The container was no longer safe. It was threatening her.

The contractions were particularly threatening to him.

"We've got to get out of here," she thought frantically. Every time the walls of their container pressed in on them, his distress became more evident. She could feel it in the agony of his heartbeat. He had not grown as fast as she had, but even his reduction in size had not helped. She could have filled the container by herself. She had no word for selfish, but she already had the feeling.

In his distress, he was frequently discharging waste into their water. She felt the lumps of it against her delicate skin.

"We're getting close," she thought to him. "Can you hold on?"

"Maybe," he thought, "but I think there's something wrong with the form I chose. It's not developing well."

"Don't leave me," she pushed her body closer to his until she realized the pressure was distressing him. "Don't ever leave me."

* * *

The inward pressure of the container began to have a rhythm. She was being forced down. There was soft barrier at the top of her head, a barrier with an expanding hole at its center. She became aware that the pushing action of her head was widening the hole. Her head was parting the barrier to her birth. She suddenly understood she would go first. The idea terrified her. She pressed her body against his again, then stopped herself as much as she could. Her life process was strangling him. She could feel him lying flaccid against her where once he had curled. He was barely present, hanging onto his fragile life as the cord between them became more and more vulnerable to the process in which they were engaged.

"Don't leave me," she thought. He didn't think back and she felt his weakness like a sigh of resignation.

* * *

"I'm getting fetal distress on one of those babies, Doctor," OB nurse Grace Smith spoke in hushed tones outside the labor room. "I don't like what I'm hearing. One thing more, I've got meconium leaking out. The blackest, thickest meconium I've ever seen."

"Shit!" Howard Goldsmith walked into the labor room and greeted Fiona McCarthy with his reassuring smile.

* * *

Fiona McCarthy would have been stunningly beautiful if the lines of her face had not been set into a permanent expression of angry bitterness. She had the classic, chiseled features of beauty, dark brown hair and startling blue eyes rimmed with thick black lashes; black Irish-stunning, tall and slender. She had been hysterical through most of the birthing process, a birth that was taking a long time.

Her frantic husband had brought her to the hospital in the early stages of labor, well before the second stage of hard labor had set in. Even then, her huge blue eyes were swollen and red from the tears that accompanied her constant insistence that she couldn't bear the suffering and the pain.

"I thought God only gave you as much pain as you could stand," Fiona wailed. She was no longer beautiful. Her long dark hair was lank with the grease of sweat. Her fine rich mouth twisted with rage and bitterness, "Jesus God, Frank McCarthy, you dirty bastard! Wait 'til you come near me again. I'll cut your dirty little pecker off."

"Fiona, I..."

"I can't stand no more of this. I hate these babies, makin' me suffer so!"

"Fiona, don't..."

"For Christ's sake Frank, get somebody to put me out. What the hell good are you if you let these babies give me all this pain."

The admitting nurse had considered sending them home and telling them to come back when the labor really got started. On second thought, she had taken pity on the frantic young husband, and decided against it.

"Poor guy," Milly Evans said, after admitting Fiona to the maternity floor. "Probably brought her here so he could get away from all the abuse. God help the delivery team."

"God help the children," Polly Simkins returned.

* * *

Long before she had gone into hard labor, Fiona's screams were disturbing the other patients.

"Christ on a stick! She'll scare the daylights out of everyone else," Howard Goldsmith grouched. "Put her in a private room with a door. I don't need the whole ward thinking that's the way to have a baby. And for God's sake, don't forget about her."

But of course they had forgotten about her, hadn't watched her closely enough, hadn't wanted to be in there with her hysteria and invective. Difficult woman, Fiona McCarthy, and now one of the babies was in serious trouble and they hadn't caught it early enough.

* * *

Dr. Howard Goldsmith, tall, intellectual, his shoulders bent with the weight of his responsibilities, hurried into Fiona's private room. The amniotic fluid pulsing out of her vagina was the color and consistency of chocolate pudding; thick and lumpy. Amniotic fluid contaminated by feces from a troubled fetus; meconium. It presaged great risk for the babies. If one of the infants inhaled it during the birthing process, aspiration pneumonia and death would most likely follow. He was furious. The damned woman had been allowed to reach very

advanced labor. Her contractions were coming on the minute and lasting for fifty-five seconds. For the sake of her children she should have been given a C-Section hours ago.

Dr. Goldsmith pressed the fetoscope against Fiona's swollen belly.

"You have to be quiet and hold still now, Fiona," he commanded, using a tone of voice she hadn't heard before. Fiona wondered why he was mad at her and couldn't think of a reason.

"My babies are all right aren't they?" she asked, working herself into another bout of hysteria. "Oh God, I couldn't stand it if the babies weren't all right. Jesus, Joseph and Mary, I don't want to go through this again. Make the babies all right!"

"HUSH!"

The heartbeats were rapid. One sounded muffled, but that might logically be expected depending on how the little ones were lying. Then he heard what Grace had heard, the erratic run of beats of a baby in trouble. The hair on his scalp prickled.

"Thank you, my dear," he smiled confidently and patted her distended stomach. Uncharacteristically he left it to Fiona to pull down her own gown and pull up the sheet.

"My babies!" she screamed. "Somethin's wrong with my babies. I knew it. God will take my babies away from me. God will punish me for my selfishness. Mother always told me I was too selfish, and now I pay the price. First He made me suffer all this pain and now He's going to take my babies away. It's a vengeful God that makes a woman suffer so..."

"Mmmph," said Dr. Goldsmith, rolling his eyes and closing the door behind him. If that baby does die it'll be well out of her clutches, he thought viciously. Then he pushed the thought away, making room for the important work ahead.

"You were right, Grace," he acknowledged before beginning to rap out his staccato orders. "Have Alice get the husband to sign the OR releases. He's here isn't he?"

She nodded.

"Alert the surgical team. Call the OR and get a room ready STAT. Get a pediatric team, no two teams, up there. Be sure to tell Leon what's going on. He's going to have his hands full with this one. I haven't seen meconium as dark as that in twenty years. One of those babies is in deep shit."

"I wish you'd stop saying that," Grace chuckled at his long-standing joke. She was surprised when Howard Goldsmith turned away from her. The fact that he was too preoccupied with the emergency to continue his normal game with the meconium told her how serious the baby's condition must be.

* * *

"Fiona, my dear," Howard Goldsmith sat next to the bitter, young woman's bed, "we're going to have to take these babies by caesarian section."

"Holy Mother of God!" Fiona wailed.

"Mrs. Smith is going to get you ready. I want you to be very brave and strong and help the medical staff in every way you can."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I'm going to lose my babies."

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

"I must have sinned dreadfully to have this happen. Oh God, what sins could I have committed to lose my babies?" Her face made a sudden, unexpected, rapid change. "It's not my sins at all," Fiona spat venom, her eyes narrowing to slits. "It's Frank's sins, not mine. The bloody bastard. All that drinkin' and carousing. He's killed my babies."

Howard Goldsmith had a sudden rush of shocked intuition that told him she was totally insane. He brushed away the thought and concurrent responsibility. This is not going to be easy, he thought to himself.

* * *

Inside the container she could feel the rush of adrenaline from the womb itself. The terror that her container was transmitting, added to the terror of the shrinking and pushing around her. In the distance she could hear frightened screaming and wailing which seemed to penetrate every cell of the walls that surrounded her.

More than the screams, she found herself receiving thought communication from that other mind, the utterly terrified mind of the other heart beat, the heart beat that wasn't his. She found herself in two places at once, inside feeling and outside watching. She knew the feelings of everyone around her and everyone was tense and scared. She was tense and scared. Only he felt nothing at all. He lay flaccid against her, barely alive, unable to move, the exertion of hanging onto life using up the last bits of reserve in his little body. The adrenaline feeding through their umbilical cords elevated his heart beat to dangerous levels. Her own heart was racing.

She became lost in terror. She felt close to death and knew that she wanted life. She was afraid of the separation from the other heartbeat, afraid of separation from him. Her terror for him was almost as great as her terror for herself.

"Don't leave me," she thought frantically.

There was no response.

Despite the battering by the walls that enclosed her, her senses were more acute than ever before. She knew everything and she knew nothing. She couldn't sense more than a thin reed of consciousness left in him. The pulse in his cord was feeble and erratic.

"I'm killing you," she thought in confusion. "We have to get out of here. I don't want to leave you. I need to stay with you. Don't leave me."

And then the pressure on her own small body was so great that she knew she had no choice but to go. She felt herself slipping down a tight passage toward a bright light.

* * *

The operating room was hot and white. Fiona was wheeled in on a thin flat stretcher.

"You're gonna cut me open?" she screamed, suddenly realizing where she was. "Who told you that you could cut me open?"

"Your husband signed permission."

"The fuckin' bastard!" she screamed. "I'll kill the rotten fuckin' bastard."

"Now Fiona, I already told you, we have to do a caesarian section," Howard Goldsmith soothed.

"But you didn't say you were gonna cut me open," she screamed trying to get up. Suddenly she was gripped by a contraction so strong that it knocked her back onto the stretcher. The terror in her face was pitiful to see, "Oh God!"

"Doctor, I think a baby is coming," Grace Smith reported, in her matter-of-fact voice. "Yes, I have crowning. I can see hair. Fifty cents already."

Fiona screamed again.

* * *

Her head was being squeezed through a tiny tube. Though she didn't know it, more than one hundred and fifty pounds of pressure squeezed inward on her tiny skull. She was pushed downward, but then the downward pressure released and she was stuck in the tube. She knew with certainty that she would never be able to get out. The pain and pressure was frightful. She was tormented without understanding. Terror controlled her every second.

The squeezing pressure started again. She felt her tiny neck folding into her shoulders. Her birth was killing her. She lost consciousness.

* * *

"Stop pushing, Fiona. Pant like this. Don't push. Don't make the baby come too fast. It isn't good for it."

Fiona wouldn't listen. She had to get that horrid baby out of her body. It hurt. She hurt. It felt as if her insides were being torn apart. She hated having babies. She pushed with all her strength. Horrid things, babies, they hurt too much.

* * *

Her head shot out of the tube with tremendous force. The blood vessels seemed to explode in response to their release. There was an excruciating pain in her head. Her body followed shortly. After the pressure on her head, the release of her body seemed almost an after thought as it slid out into the cold, dry air.

Firm hands grasped her as she slid forward. She was bathed in white light nearly as bright as the light in that other place, the place of a distant, rapidly fading memory. That memory, which was being pushed out of her consciousness by the terrible things that were happening to her now.

Giants without faces surrounded her. Harsh material scraped against her delicate skin. That skin which until this moment had only been touched by water and him. Her mouth was forced open and a hard rubber point was forced deep into her throat. Her body wretched and gagged, as fluids were sucked out of her delicate airway. Again and again the harsh rubber point was forced into her mouth, violating her throat, robbing her of breath.

"Be sure she doesn't inhale any of that meconium," a voice spoke near her. A deep rough voice that was unlike any sound she had ever heard, a voice that made her tremble. "This is the healthy one, we don't want to lose her."

She cried and fought against the rubber, pushing the rough hands away from her. It was useless. The harsh rubber was forced up her nose. The insides were sucked out repeatedly. She tried to push against it, to turn her head. She was gripped tighter. She knew powerlessness.

The team worked hard to make her safe. Her eyes were forced open and burning drops were placed in each one. The excruciating pain guaranteed that she would not be blinded by syphilis. She cried in helpless protest against the abuse. Her cries were mewling, soft against the other screams that filled the room as Fiona prepared to deliver her second child.

* * *

She was wrapped in something soft. She couldn't move. She didn't want to move. If she moved the softness would scrape against her skin like sand paper. She felt half dead from the birthing. Yet even in her exhausted state her mind reached out frantically for him.

"Where are you?" she asked. She pushed her mind to the farthest reaches of the huge container in which she found herself. She had no sense of him. "Don't leave me," she whimpered. "I can't do this without you."

"Here, Betty," a deep, extremely gentle, voice murmured close to her ear, "let me have the precious little one. My God, isn't she a perfect little beauty. Makes you just ache to take care of her."

She felt gentle arms lift her and snuggle her against a lean hard chest in which a steady heart beat. The arms held her for a while and then they let her go, placing her gently in a small container with sides. She explored the container with her mind, it felt safe, but she missed the closeness of human contact, the rumbling caress of the deep voice.

"Don't leave me," she whimpered.

* * *

Fiona was out of control. She twisted her head from side to side and screeched one long curdling scream after another. Howard Goldsmith was disgusted.

"Give her something, Ed," he told the anesthesiologist.

"It'll stop the labor."

"Fine. We've got permission. We'll take the other one by C-Section."

"Anesthesia will jeopardize the other baby. She needs a spinal, Howard."

"We can't do a spinal on her. She's a lunatic. Put her out. Get it over with."

"You're the boss."

The black mask came down over Fiona's face and the screaming stopped.

* * *

She was cold. She was being moved along another passageway. This passage didn't hurt, but she was so cold. The rubbing and drying had abraded her skin and it burned from a thousand screaming nerves. Her tiny throat and delicate nostrils ached from the rubber tube. Her eyes were burning. He was gone. She could not find him anywhere. A cold dread possessed her. There were no heartbeats in her life. She made a dozen new decisions in that passageway from the delivery room to the nursery. Survival meant separation. Survival meant losing him. Survival included painful assault. Survival meant powerlessness. Survival included surrendering to strong arms that would take care of her and then leave her. Survival meant enduring unendurable pain and loss. Survival meant suffering. Survival meant guilt. Guilt deserved punishment.

"Don't leave me," she thought as she sucked against her fist.

The light changed, bright and flickering above her. Without any context, the changes terrified her. Her mind kept moving in and out of consciousness. She wanted to go away, to go back, to stop the process in which she found herself, but she couldn't find a way out. Her only choice was forward, a leaf hurtling through the maelstrom of life.

The movement of her container stopped. Her body adjusted to the feeling of stillness. She was amazed at how much there was to feel in this new existence. It was overwhelming. In the other place everything was instant and mental. Here it was all physical and the agony seemed to last forever.

Another faceless giant with firm, gentle hands picked her up. It unwrapped her and placed her in a new, warm container. Bright lights assaulted her eyes. This new container had six sides. Once again warmth surrounded her and her new body could relax. The abrasive material no longer bruised her skin except where she lay on it. She had never experienced lying on herself before. The concept took a lot of thought.

She reached out for him but he was nowhere to be found. Between her and the world of pain and fear there was only the safety of her new container. She explored it with her mind. It was strangely silent. There were no reassuring heartbeats. She searched for them and found a void. Finally she relaxed. Nothing new had happened in a while. After all that she had been through, she began to feel secure in the warmth and safety of her quiet isolation. She closed her eyes and slept, exhausted.

* * *

"Take her away, she's not mine," Fiona sulked, looking with loathing at the dark-haired daughter they had brought her. "I had a son. Where is my son?"

"Come on, Fiona. Look at her. She's beautiful, the most beautiful baby I've ever seen. See, we put her hair in a little peak for you," Wilma Hoag said, wondering if Fiona would put this beautiful child up for adoption. Wilma hoped so, hoped the child would find a loving mother.

"Where's my son?" Fiona screamed.

"He died Fiona. He was in trouble for a long time. They said he was malformed. But your daughter is here and she needs you," Wilma tried again.

"I don't want her," Fiona said, and turned her face to the wall.

* * *

She longed to be touched, but that only happened eight times a day. Eight times a day they would mete out the holding. Holding came with a rubber nipple. Outside her container the air

was cold, but the liquid graced her throat and she liked the feeling of contact. At first she had cried when they returned her to the container but over time she learned to love her box.

In the endless days of suspended time she thought about him and wondered what had happened. He was an indelible record in her memory tracks, but already awareness of his exact image was fading, pushed by the battery of new experiences to a place in her deep subconscious.

"Don't leave me," she would hiccough against her tiny fist as she sucked on it for comfort.

* * *

It was Frank who named her Danielle.

"Danielle in the Lion's Den," he had only half joked as he contemplated his sweet, utterly lovely daughter. He took a deep stoic breath as the thought of a lifetime with Fiona spread out before him like a prison sentence. There was some consolation. At least he would have Danielle.

"I love you, darlin'," he whispered. "I love you and I'll never leave you."