

Her Uncle

The streetlight confused her. She remembered that she was only supposed to walk across the road when the light facing her was green, and she knew to look and try to make eye contact with the drivers of the cars waiting to turn. But at the corner of the block where her apartment was located the crossing also had a little walking man symbol that told her exactly when it was okay to leave the curb, here there was no such picture. She was sure that her father had told her something about this, but she couldn't recall his exact words and now she was without the comfort of his strong hand folded softly around hers as she attempted to get to the other side of the busy street.

Finally, after she had stood at the edge of the sidewalk and observed two or three full cycles of the light, she felt for sure that she had determined when would be the safest time to cross. When the light flashed green again, she looked over her shoulder to make sure no cars were turning, then quickly walked to the opposite curb, making sure to stay between the bright yellow lines stenciled upon the surface of the cracked and not very neatly patched asphalt.

The tall buildings and myriad passers-by paid little notice of the triumphant hop she made to complete this part of her journey, although she saw that an old woman sitting at the bus stop gave her a slight smile, which she magnified and flashed back, grateful acknowledgement for the recognition of her courage. With that, and the addition of a tiny skip to her step, she turned and headed down the long sidewalk that pointed straight into the heart of the city.

So far her adventure had gone well. Skipping out of the day care center had been simple, as she had thought it would be. Miss Miller was a wonderful lady, who made the best French toast in the world, but it was obvious that she'd never stopped to consider that one of her charges might try to "break out" of the tiny store front facility. Everything was set up to keep someone from getting in without permission, or to prevent one of the little kids from escaping ... but a dead-latch wasn't much of an impediment to a determined six-year old. And the pillows stuffed in her sleep sack, something she'd learned one afternoon watching a movie on the cable channel, were sure to fool both Miss Miller and her new assistant, the witch woman with the funny eyes, at least until the end of nap time.

As she walked she recognized the stores and apartments she passed, and was quite proud of herself for being able to remember the route despite the fact that it was so difficult for her to see clearly through the darkened windows of her father's limousine. Soon, she remembered, it would get a little more complicated. There was a section of the trip downtown that he'd always made her sit back in her seat, where she couldn't really view much out the windows, saying to her, "I really don't want you to see this part of town."

She'd asked him why, several times, but he'd never responded more than to say, "When you're older ... a lot older ... well, if we're all lucky you won't ever have to see this sort of perversion." She wasn't quite sure what he'd meant, and the only help given her by her best friend, Clancy, who was a lot older, almost eight, was that "... it means nasty, really nasty."

Now, from the number of times she'd had to cross the road so far, she was pretty sure that soon she would come to the nasty part of town. She checked her shoes again, thinking to herself how smart she was to have worn the old sneakers she'd found in the lost and found bin at the day care place. Ugh ... she hated the nasty poop the dogs sometime left around the entrance to her building, and hoped that she wouldn't have to walk very far through it. With a sigh of relief she grasped the cloth bag in her hand tightly, reminding herself that once she was past the nasty place she could change into her good shoes and throw the old ones into one of the big metal garbage cans that could be found in the middle of every block.

She looked up as she walked, paying close attention to the spires of the tall office buildings in front of her. Her father's was the big silver one, with the pale blue circle on its side and the green trees on the roof. He worked at the very top of the structure, and she always loved the elevator ride that brought them directly to the foyer of his office.

"Do you own the building, Daddy?"

"Ah, no ... I mean, yes. I guess if you want to be perfectly honest, I do own the building."

"Are you the boss of all the people in the building?" Some of her first memories were of the special manner in which everyone treated her father.

"Not really the boss, honey ... I'm more like ... um ... kinda of like their father, just as I'm your father."

She was puzzled, "I thought I was your only child?"

"You are, Pun'kin!" he laughed ... how she loved it when he let go of himself and laughed. "I help them ... take care of them ... do you remember when you asked for new crayons for your birthday?"

"Yes," she still had the giant box of colored wax markers, Miss Miller had told her it was the biggest one in the entire world. "Those are really neat crayons."

"Yes, they are. And, after I gave them to you, you spent the entire weekend making new drawings to decorate my study and the kitchen. Remember?"

"Yes."

"Well, I buy crayons for all the people in the building. And markers. And pencils. And lots of other stuff. And they make marvelous drawings for me ... for all of us."

"What do they draw, Daddy?"

"Wonderfully beautiful buildings. Houses and stores and hospitals and malls and, oh, a thousand other things! And then other people in the building ... and in other buildings ... I, ah, I buy them supplies and they build those buildings."

She'd looked up at him, so happy that when he gazed down the tears she was shedding had made her almost black eyes seem like tiny portals leading directly into the innocent depth of her child soul, and he'd clutched her to him, crying and laughing at the same time. Secure in his embrace, she'd could see, as was usually the case, that the expression in his eyes was the same as when he stared at the picture of her mother that he kept safe in a golden frame perched upon the nightstand next to his big bed.

The barricade in front of her was a sudden surprise. "Detour." She wasn't quite sure, but she knew that when her father was in a hurry, or was late getting to a meeting, that this was a word that could cause him to use one of his bad words. He would always apologize, of course, "I'm sorry ... honest, I should know better. Will you forgive me?"

It was a ritual, right down to the full minute that she would pause before she looked over at him, his eyes always waiting to meet hers, "Okay, Daddy ... but don't you dare say that word again!" He would laugh, she would laugh ... then he would drive on while she wondered what was so bad about that particular word. It didn't sound that terrible when she said it aloud while all by herself in her bedroom. Someday she might ask Miss Miller, she thought, but only after she'd worked a little longer trying to figure it out for herself.

The road was blocked by wooden barriers, beyond them she could see a giant hole in the surface of the street from which dirty smoke and swirling hot steam were squirting towards the sky overhead. Lots of the white-hat men were wandering around, as were a small army of policemen ... police officers, her father constantly reminded her ... and quite a few firefighters. Obviously a bomb had blown up the street, she'd seen that on the news one night ... except that on the television everyone had seemed very upset. Here people appeared fairly calm, and she could detect no evidence of the fear that she had felt emanating from the people she'd seen in the newscast.

She looked up and spotted the top of her father's building. It was only a short distance down the street past the obstruction in front of her, she was glad to notice, since her feet were beginning to hurt and the dull pains in her stomach were reminding her that she'd skipped out of the day care before lunch was served. She could see that she had to go around the confusing scene that blocked her path, the question was, which way?

Both choices seemed nearly identical to her, and she finally made the decision to turn right because she'd spotted a pretzel vender's shiny chrome cart parked against a building several blocks further along the side street. Checking carefully at each intersection, she quickly walked the distance and soon found herself standing in front of the cart.

She and her father often shared a pretzel when they went walking, and the yeasty aroma brought to her clear memories of many fine afternoons spent strolling in the park across the street from their apartment. There were only a few people being served, mostly businessmen wearing soft gray suits and neatly pressed white shirts. Her father looked good in such outfits, but she knew that, no matter what the situation, he was never comfortable until he could shed his suit coat and tie, and roll his shirtsleeves up past his elbows.

The thought brought to her a recollection of the photograph of her dad and mom that hung on the wall in his study. It must have been taken when they were married, she figured, since her mother was wearing a beautiful white princess gown. As for Dad ... well, she smiled to herself, in the picture he'd taken off his tuxedo jacket and ... yup, his sleeves were rolled up past his elbows, as usual. They looked so happy in the picture, as a very little girl it had been the one upon which she had built her own memory picture of the woman she had never met, but whom she was sure had loved her very much.

"What'cha want, kid?"

The India man selling pretzels wore a turban, and was so tiny that she wondered if a sudden sharp gust of wind from the towering buildings above might pick him up and carry him into the street. "I ... if you please, Sir, I would like to have a pretzel. With mustard. Just a little mustard. And one extra napkin, if that's okay with you."

"You're a little miss who knows what she wants, aren't you?" Even as he spoke he was reaching into the big glass box to select her pretzel. "Anything else?"

"Yes, please. I would like a soda, if you have it a ..." she thought about the rules for a second, instantly realizing that she'd made a weekend choice on a weekday, "... no, I'm sorry. I'm supposed to have milk. Do you have any milk?"

"Yes, miss ... fresh from a Jersey cow," he laughed at his own joke, several gold teeth gleaming in the late afternoon sunshine that filtered down between the buildings. She responded with her own laughter, not that she understood the joke, but more a reaction to him being a really funny man.

"That'll be four dollars, Miss." He handed her the pretzel, all wrapped in paper, and the tiny cardboard container of milk. She noticed the house-shaped box was identical to the ones she was given at day care.

Removing the silver bracelet from her wrist, she handed it to the India man. "Could you please open this for me. My fingers are too small to unsnap the little compartment. There's some money hidden in there. My father said it was for emergencies ... but, well, I'm pretty hungry so I think this is okay."

His coal black eyes opened wide for a second when he pried the face from the jewelry and found the hundred dollar bill tucked inside. "Are you sure this is okay, Miss? This ... this is a great deal of money for a little girl like you."

"That's okay, my daddy has a lot of money. We're rich, I think."

The sidewalk vender counted out her change. "I'm sorry, I've only got a couple of twenties left so you're going to have to carry quite a few bills. They won't all fit back in your bracelet." He handed her a neatly folded stack of bills, "What do you want to do?"

She thought for a second, "Ah ..." then remembered something Clancy had once told her, "I'll put them in my shoe," she remarked brightly, "They'll be safe there!"

Walking away from the cart, pretzel in one hand, milk and money clutched tightly in the other, she realized that she need a place to sit and eat, as well as to remove her shoe to hide the money she was holding. Looking further along the block, she spotted a nicely trimmed brownstone, very similar to the one in which Clancy lived down the street from her own home.

Walking up to the structure, she immediately found what she was looking for. The substreet apartments were reached by sets of wrought-iron stairs descending from the sidewalk, and she knew that she could sit on the risers at the bottom of a staircase without being disturbed by the pedestrians walking by.

Leaving the sidewalk, she carefully stepped down to the bottom of the first staircase she encountered. It was actually fairly clean, which was good, she thought, since her father tended to get upset when she got her clothing greasy or stained, something that always seemed to happen when she was around Clancy. Finding everything satisfactory, she sat on the bottom step and spread out her lunch on the step above her.

In no time she'd consumed the pretzel, followed by the entire carton of milk. She hadn't realized that she was so hungry, and was quite surprised at how fast the food had disappeared. And she was tired. All of a sudden, very, very tired. She flicked a few crumbs at the little birds which flitted around at her feet, startling them when she laughed aloud at their frantic antics trying to recover the tiny morsels.

Hmmm ... well, maybe she could rest her eyes for a few minutes. Above her the noise of the street seemed distant, and overhead what she could see of the sky was a golden blue. Folding her nylon windbreaker into a pillow, she carefully lay her head against the iron railing of the stairs. Just a few minutes, she thought ... I'll just rest for a few ...

She awoke with a start. Wow ... is my neck ever sore, she thought. She felt a sudden chill, and noticed that she could barely see in the dark that engulfed her. At her feet lay scattered the change from her lunch. Removing one of her shoes, she quickly picked up the bills and carefully folded them into a neat little package, which she then tucked under the sneaker's foot cushion. Putting the shoe back on, she stood up, wriggling her toes and satisfying herself that the lump

under her foot wasn't going to be a problem. Feeling more of the chill in the air, she donned her windbreaker and quickly ascended the stairs to the street above.

It was dark out, the strip of sky above the street a menacing deep blue. Hardly any cars drove by, and only a few pedestrians traversed the sidewalks. Those that she could see were scurrying along with their heads down, as if afraid to look at what was around them.

She knew she was in a little bit of trouble. Her surprise might even be spoiled, since she could see that there was now a good chance her father might have already left his office by the time she finally arrived. Then she'd have to get Michael, the friendly guard, to call her father to come get her. He had often enough drilled into her what to do in unusual situations such as this, so she wasn't really very worried. Well ... okay, she admitted to herself, maybe she was just a little bit worried. But just a little.

She looked down the street in both directions. Which way was she supposed to go ... it was hard to tell. Must be this way, she thought as she turned right, because it couldn't be the other direction.

She tried to make a model in her head, like one of the big ones in her father's office. He'd often let her bring in her little toy cars and trucks, and she would delight in spending an afternoon driving around the streets of her own little city.

Let's see ... ah ... hmmm ... his building must be over there, behind that big skyscraper ... so ... so all I have to do is turn left here ...

She crossed the street at a "T" intersection, the avenue behind her ending when it reached this particular block.

... then all I have to do is get to the other side of this block ... and ...

Looking past the row of garbage cans and bailed cardboard boxes she spotted an alley cutting through the center of the block.

... if I go this way I should come out right near the Chinese restaurant across the street from his office!

The street on which she stood was fairly well lit, making the tunnel in front of her seem even darker. Far in the distance, at the other end of the alley, she could see the glow of a stop light. As she watched it changed from yellow to red, the brightness of its color reassuring her that the alley wasn't really very long.

Hunching up her shoulders and pulling her jacket tight, thinking how nice it would be to ride home in the warmth of the limousine, she headed into the alley.

She had walked several yards when she was shocked to notice that from within the confines of the alley its beginning and end were completely invisible, somehow the multitude of crates and dumpsters in the narrow corridor blocked the view of both ends. And, she could hear now, there were things in the alley ... alive things. One of them had scurried past her so close that

she could feel it brush against her leg ... and it was stiff and hard and bristly, not soft and cuddly like the tiny creatures in the cage on the corner shelf in the day care.

She started to sing ... her father had taught her that. Once, sitting in the back of the room while he was taking part in some important meeting, she'd heard him begin to hum softly to himself. While everyone else in the room was concentrating on the blueprints spread out on the table in front of them, she could see from across the room the nervous fear in his eyes. Then, in a flash, someone heard him and made a sharp remark, "... looks like someone here is amused by all this!"

"Not amused, gentlemen," by then he was grinning, and they never had the chance to see the look of doubt on his face, "Entertained."

"Really ... entertained?"

"Yup! After all, how often is it that I get to watch five men in gray suits blow a hundred million dollar deal because they can't decide what color paper to put in the bathrooms! One - zero - zero - zero - zero - zero - zero - zero - zero! Yessir ... I'd say that someday someone is going to sit in the crapper in this building and, while they're looking at the toilet paper, they're going to laugh real loud while they think about the number of zero's in their own bank account. Might not be you guys ... but someone'll be laughing!"

She'd sat as quiet as a mouse, watching as the five men stared into her father's eyes. His fear was gone by then, all they saw was the mirth on his face, and the deep unwavering blackness of his eyes presented to them only the unmeasurable depth of his conviction.

They'd gone out to eat, that night, to celebrate. He'd actually let her sip a tiny bit of his bubbly drink, and the pretty woman friend he'd brought along had made things even more fun by teaching her other ways to gently tease her father and make him laugh which, the woman had whispered to her, was "... what we're supposed to do."

"We're you afraid, Dad? When I looked at you you seemed afraid?" she'd asked during dessert.

"Yes, Pun'kin, I was petrified. Between 'em those five don't have the spark to light a Christmas tree bulb. Four year's work ... over seven million dollars ... the honest sweat of a lot of dedicated people ... yes, I was scared."

"What was it that changed their minds?" The pretty woman beat her to the question, but she didn't mind. She hoped that someday she could be so pretty.

"All the zero's ... that's all. To them buildings are just buildings ... people working are simply statistics ... but, oh, how all those zero's got to them!"

They'd had such a good evening, and it was later, after the nanny had arrived and he was getting ready to out for the night, that he'd tucked her in and told her about the singing. And she'd remembered ... as she carefully remembered everything he taught her.

She was having a hard time finding her way now, unable to see even the pavement in front of her. And ... she wasn't quite sure of it ... but ... yes ... there it was again. A sound ... like ...

Someone was behind her in the dark, following her. Her heart began to race and suddenly her palms were very cold. Okay ... okay, she thought. Breathe deeply ... slowly and deeply ... and quietly, she added quickly, very, very quietly. Just like he taught you to do when you learned to cross the street. Relax ...

She pressed herself against the damp brick wall of the old warehouse she was standing next to. It was dark ... if she couldn't see them probably they couldn't spot her. Just like playing hide and seek with Clancy ... that's all ... and he never managed to find her ...

"I know you're there, little lady ... you might as well come out 'cause I'm gonna find ya's anyhow." The voice was high pitched, and filled with something ... something ... like the screaming voice of the man she'd seen the police pull out of the car in front of them one day when they were caught in a downtown traffic jam. "Now ... com'on out now!"

She stepped into the center of the alley, finally spotting the shadowy figure only a few paces away, "What do you want?" She put away the fear in her face, as she'd seen her father do in the meeting that day, and stared directly into the black shadow where his eyes should be located.

"I know you've got the money ... I seen that old Hindu guy give you your change. No nickels and dimes for a pretty little thing like you, huh? I'll bet you got all sorts of money ... I'll bet you even might have a diamond or somethin' ... rich kid like you. I heard 'bout your kind ... you prob'ly got your own credit card."

She listened carefully, never taking her eyes from what she could see of his face. Never show fear ... that's what her dad had taught her, never let them see it. "The money's in my shoe, you can have it. I don't have anything else ... my father doesn't buy me stuff like ..."

"Shutup! Gimme the fuckin' money! Now!"

She bent down and unlaced her sneaker, careful to make no sudden movement. Finding the tiny roll of bills, she straightened up and carefully smoothed her clothes. "Here," she reached forward with the bills, "You can have this."

He grabbed the bills from her hand, cutting her palm with a rough fingernail as he did so.

"Ouch ... that wasn't nice! I told you could have the money."

"Ouch," he mimicked, "Ouch ... that wasn't nice! Oh, my. You want nice, huh? Maybe's I should show you nice ... how's that sound? You wanna little nice from your friend, Big Dickey?" He laughed aloud at the joke she knew had been given, but didn't understand. The sound of his voice reverberating along the alley walls made her feel very alone ... very lonely ... it was getting harder to remember all the things her father had taught her to do ... difficult to know anything except the pounding in her chest and the chill feeling which was slowly spreading to all parts of her body.

He continued to chuckle loudly, "Yea, that's a good'n! I'll teach the little rich bitch a lesson ... one they don't give you in your rich bitch school, I'll bet!" He moved towards her, an errant shaft of moonlight suddenly illuminating the crazed expression on his pale-white face, the cold reflected light clearly delineating the evil gleam in his eyes.

"Ain't this gonna be sum'thin' ... school's in session an' I'm gonna be the teacher. Now all you got to do is ..."

"Stop!" The voice reverberated in the alley. It came from directly alongside her, out of the corner of her eye she could just barely see the outline of a figure standing a few feet away.

"Stop," again, strong and clear, a voice like that of many of foremen who worked for her father. A voice from one who had at one time been used to commanding others.

"Who the fuck you be? What you be doin' in my alley?"

"Give her the money back ... then walk away slowly." Again, an order.

Something silver suddenly leapt into the hand of the man who had taken her money, "Like I said, Jack ... what you be doin' in my alley?"

"Honey, step back quickly so you're not in my way, would you please."

The voice again commanded, but, this time, more like when her father told her to go to bed or clean up her room. She moved back swiftly to where she could lean against the wall again.

"I dunno who you be, Dude ... but you're 'bout to learn a lesson in manners. This is my alley ... this is my money ... and she's ..."

"She's going to go home with her money. And you've one last chance to back away from this ... that's all."

The bad man ... she'd already decided who was who ... moved suddenly, very suddenly. He leapt across the distance separating the two men, his knife flashing even while he moved. She gasped, startled, for she could now see that he was much bigger and younger than the man who was trying to help her.

The men struggled, there was a lot of grunting and thrashing around. The alley was filled with the clatter of trash cans being pushed over. Then ... as quickly as it had begun ... it was over. One of the figures was lying on the ground, moaning, and the other was leaning tiredly against the far wall of the alley.

The man on the ground began to breath very rapidly ... quick, shallow breaths, "You mo'fucker! You done killed me. What the shit you wanna do that for?" With that he became very quiet and, after a few moments, she could hear no more sounds of him breathing.

The other man slowly slid to a sitting position against the wall. She crossed the alley to stand at this side. Looking down at him, she could see that he appeared older than her father. He'd a scraggly beard, and didn't seem as if he'd had a bath in a very long time. His hair was all matted, tied with a short piece of robe into what truly resembled a pony tail. The old jacket he wore was

exactly like the one her father kept hanging in the foyer closet, although on that one the green hue of the heavy material was much deeper and the patches on the shoulders and pockets were much more colorful.

The whites of his eyes stood out starkly against his dark brown skin, and instinctively she knew that he must be in a lot of pain. "Are you all right? Did he ... did he cut you with his knife?"

"Yeah ... I can't believe I wasn't ready when he jumped ... everything I learned and I let a street hood catch me off guard! Damn, I must be getting old. Oh ... sorry about the language. You'll forgive, won't you?"

She couldn't help but laugh, "Well, okay ... as long as you don't do it again."

He grimaced, but then a smile appeared on his face. "What are you doing down here in this part of town? Are you lost?"

"I was going ... I mean, I left the day care to walk down to my father's building. I thought I'd surprise him ... it's ... it's his birthday today. I made him a card, it's in my coat pocket."

"So, what happened?"

"I fell asleep for awhile and then it was dark and I lost the map in my head ... my father says to keep a map in your head but I just couldn't find it and then ..." The tears pouring from her eyes stung, but she couldn't hold them back. All of a sudden she was trembling and shaking, her legs incredibly weak. She collapsed next to the man, and, just as her father so often did, he put his arm around her and pulled her into a warm embrace.

"That's okay ... I'd cry, too, but I used up all my tears a long time ago. It's what you're supposed to do, the tears'll help wash away the pain."

Already her sobbing had subsided, and she looked up into his face. He was a handsome man, like her father, and somehow she knew that if he were to shave and clean up he could walk into his father's office wearing a gray suit and fit right in with the rest of the fancy dressers. Feeling the comfort of his hug, and staring back into the infinite depth of his caring eyes, she corrected her thoughts. No ... no, the minute he entered the room he'd be taking his jacket off and ... yes, she was sure of it, within a few minutes he'd have his shirtsleeves rolled up past his elbows. She snuggled into his arms.

"What about ... him?" she looked over at the shapeless form lying in the middle of the alley, "Is he ... um ... is he, you know ..."

The man followed her gaze, then looked down into her eyes, "Yea ... I think the word they use is 'dead.' He's quite dead ... I ... I didn't know any other way to handle him."

"Oh."

She was quiet for awhile, thinking about the entire situation. The dead man didn't bother her, although she was sure that someone was going to get really mad about what happened.

"I should be trying to find my father's building ... I think."

He grimaced, and she could almost herself feel the sharp pain passing through him, "Well, that's a bit of a problem. This guy here ... this thing ... his name's 'Snake,' if you can believe that, and he's got a lot of buddies in this neighborhood. Truth is, for about another eight or nine hours, they kind of run this part of the world. How far back were you when you got the change he was trying to steal?"

She thought for second, "Um ... several blocks, at least, why?"

"He must have trailed you from that point. He was too much of a weasel too try anything in daylight, or out on the street, but turning down the alley in the dark ... that put you onto his turf, so to speak."

"Oh ..." Again, it was all she could say.

"He'll have several of his friends out looking for him ... they'll know what he was going to do. Much as I hate to say it, I think the safest thing for you to do is stay right here until daylight."

"What then?"

"They'll be gone in the morning ... things kinda wind down about four or five o'clock. Then we can get you to your father's building ... do you know the name of it?"

"No, I can't remember ... but it's really bright silver, like a mirror, and ... and it has a big blue circle on the side up ..."

A look of recognition crossed his face, "I know it ... I mean, I know where it is. We're actually only a few blocks away. But, well, for now at least, we're on a different planet."

She shivered, a sharp breeze coming down the alley bringing the night chill to her small frame. The man took his arm from around her, grunting as he did so, and slowly rose to his feet. Removing his green jacket, he carefully placed it around her shoulders. He gently fastened each of the tarnished brass buttons. The coat was so long that she easily was able to fold her feet up so that they were warm also, and, as he sat back down again, he tucked the bottom of the coat under her so that she became enclosed in a comfortable tent.

"There, it'll do for you as it's served me well many a night."

"What about you ... won't you be cold?"

"No ... I'll be alright. I'm used to it, but thanks for asking." He wrapped his arm around her once again, pulling her close to his chest. "You just stay snug and warm, okay. It won't be that long until the morning ..." his voice trailed off for a second, but then returned vibrant and full of warmth, "... not very long at all. Would you like to hear a little song, just to keep the two of us from being afraid of the dark?"

She wanted to tell him all about her father, but, secure in his embrace, she knew that it wasn't necessary. "Yes ... I'll close my eyes and make a picture movie while you sing, all right?"

His voice was very, very soft now, yet she could feel from within him what he was singing, "Day is done ... gone the sun ... from the lakes ... from the hills ... from the sky ...all is well ... safely rest ... all is well ... all is well ..."

"They've found her, Sir!" His secretary almost knocked him over as she burst into his office, "One of your friends downtown just called and ..."

"Is she okay? Tell me ... now ... I want to know. Is she okay?"

"I ... we don't know. All he had was a note from the desk sergeant in the ..." She looked at the tiny pad of paper in her hand, "... Fifteenth Precinct saying that a city sanitation worker had found her. Ah ... you know, it's going to take awhile for the paper pushers downtown to get off their asses and do their jobs. The location he gave is only a couple minutes walk from here ... do you want to ... I mean, should we ..." she failed totally in her attempts to read the expression on his face.

"Hell, yes ... I mean, yes. We can run over. I have to know ... no matter what." He headed out the room, and she had to scurry to catch up with him before the elevator opened its door and admitted him inside.

"Do you want your coat?"

"No ... I'll be okay." He noted the concern in her voice, "Honest ... I know it was chilly last night. That was one of the things I noticed while we were driving around the city looking for her. But it's warming up now ... I'll be fine."

As they left the building one of the security guards stationed at the entrance received a command through the tiny earphone she wore. She pulled her weapon, a rather lethal looking automatic pistol, checked that it was loaded, and, as she holstered the gun, caught up and joined in behind him. She spoke softly into the little microphone clipped to her lapel, her actions so smooth and practiced that he was totally unaware of her presence.

They walked very quickly towards the block of old warehouses and abandoned tenements which were slightly below the grade upon which his building stood. He controlled his thoughts, focusing all of his energy into appearing calm and collected. Whenever his mind strayed for a second he would center his thinking upon the first object he happened to glance at, examining it ... inspecting it ... filling his mind with its image.

His secretary and the guard glanced at one another when he began to softly hum to himself. They'd known him for years, and were fully aware of the tremendous effort he was making on their behalf. She, especially, knew what he was doing, for she had been with him since before he'd lost his wife. She'd seen him let go, fall apart to the point that she'd had to put him to bed as if he were his own tiny baby daughter. Now ... now she knew what he was doing.

As they approached the most run down section of the area, only a few blocks from the old waterfront, they could see that the street was blocked by an eclectic collection of official vehicles. Police cars, both regular cruisers and unmarked detective units, an ambulance ... his heart began to race beyond any attempt he could manage to control it ... several city trucks, a fire truck, and ... and a long, black station wagon upon which, even from a distance, he could see was stenciled along its side with the words, "City Morgue."

As they crossed under the yellow and black tape closing off the entrance to the alley from the street, a uniformed police patrolman ... person, he reminded himself ... interposed himself between them and the dark opening between the buildings. "You can't go in here, there's an official investigation underway and ..."

Before the rookie officer could finish his carefully memorized statement the security guard was at his side. She flashed her badge in his face, then leaned close to him and whispered into his ear.

"... and I guess it'll be okay if you go in." He handed them several brightly colored plastic badges, "Here, clip these on and you'll be okay."

He'd passed by the officer before he stopped and turned back to face the young man, "Thanks ... thanks Officer ..." he glanced at the nameplate affixed to the front of the man's tunic, "... Officer Williams. I appreciate your help." With that he turned and entered the alley.

He could see a knot of people congregating a few hundred feet into the narrow corridor. Treading his way carefully between the boxes and crates, he worked his way towards the group. When he reached them the first thing he noticed was a large plastic tarp covering a form on the ground. In slow motion ... even the sound of the voices in the alley seemed to have faded away ... a police detective walked up to him, the starched white shirt and hovering presence of both secretary and guard telling the investigator everything he needed to know.

"That's not her, Sir ... she's over here." He pointed towards a tiny alcove in the side of the building.

He didn't look towards the direction the official indicated, but, instead, directly into the detective's eyes. "Is she ... is she ..." It was all he could do, and he knew, as he knew the sky and the wind and the sun in the morning, he knew that in the next second his life might come to an end ...

"She's fine, Sir. A bit chilled. Hungry as hell. But ... well, give her a good breakfast and a warm bath and she'll be good as new!"

"She wasn't ... I mean ... did ..."

"No, Sir. I told you, she's just fine. Go ask her ... I think we got a bit carried away, she's somewhere in that pile of blankets over there next to the police woman. But ... um ... she's had quite an experience, you must know."

"What happened?"

"Ah ... you know, normally I'd feel that it was important to tell you everything. So that ... well, you know. So you'd know how to talk to her. But she's one hell of a little lady, I've got to tell you. In fact, in twenty some years doing this job, I don't think I've ever met anyone quite like her. She ..."

"She takes after her mother ... on the inside, where it counts, she's just like her."

"Oh. Well, go talk with her. She'll tell you the story."

As he moved towards the mound of government issue wool blankets his guard and secretary remained by the detective, who, with a few magic hand signals, somehow managed to clear everyone away from the little girl before her father reached her.

He looked down at her, wanting so much to burst into tears ... but knowing that it wasn't yet time to do that. Sitting down beside her, he gently pulled away the blankets to reveal her face. "Hi, Pun'kin. Looks like you've had quite an adventure."

Every member of the crowd of people standing back from the two of them knew better than to laugh when the blankets exploded and the tiny girl hurled herself into his arms, all even somehow managed to restrain the chuckles which naturally tried to occur when he fell backwards, and she ended up lying on top of him, wrapped up in his arms and surrounded by the remains of her blanket cocoon.

"Damn, Pun'kin. You tryin' to squash me? Whoops ... sorry. Will you forgive me?"

She looked down into his face for the required sixty seconds, then, "Of course, Daddy ... 'long as you don't do it again. Am ... am I in trouble?"

He looked into her sweet face, "Should you be?"

"Um ... yes. At least, a little bit."

"Anything you can't fix ... or apologize for?"

She thought for a minute, "No ... I don't think so."

"Learn anything?"

"Oh, yes, Daddy ... yes, I did."

"Well, you and I'll take care of that stuff later, okay?" He stood up, easily bringing her with him. Carrying her in his arms, he started to walk from the alley. It was then he noticed the green jacket around her shoulders, its faded patches and soft color bringing sudden, sharp memories to the front of his mind.

"Where did you get the coat, sweetheart?"

She burst into story, talking so fast that at first her recounting of the events were but a blur to him. Slowly, as he stood holding her in the middle of the alley, he managed to put together a clear picture of what had taken place during the night.

"What happened to the man?"

"I don't know. When I woke up he was gone. I didn't know what to do, I remember him telling me that it wouldn't be safe to try to go out until it was light. I ... well, I was trying to figure out what to do when the city man found me."

The detective sergeant, who had been listening in from a respectful distance, walked over. "We're trying to get a line on him, Sir. He saved your daughter's life, you know, I've no doubt about that. This thing over here," he turned and spat on the tarp covered form, "... this thing had a long record of ... well, you know. Anyhow, this man who helped your daughter, he was hurt pretty bad. We found a lot of blood on the coat and over where the two of them were sitting. Paramedic tells me the guy's going to have to get medical care or he won't last very long. We're checking all the emergency rooms and clinics, but ..."

"What is it? I'd like to find this man ... to reward him ... to thank him."

"... as I was about to say, we're looking everywhere for him. But I've got to tell you that it's a long shot ... usually is in cases like this. Most of the time, guys like him, they just don't want to be found."

"Okay. But you get in touch with me if you find out anything ... immediately ... please."

Holding his daughter, he headed back up the alley towards the street. The guard walked closely behind, accepting the warm smile the little girl flashed at him. His secretary stayed behind to talk with the detective for a few seconds, then ran to rejoin them.

As they headed up the street he felt his daughter suddenly startle in his arms. "What is it, honey ... what's wrong?"

"Nothing, Daddy ... I ... I just remembered something the man said to me."

"What was it?"

"Well, I think I woke up for awhile during the night ... while he was still holding me. I was really afraid ... he knew that, just like you know when I'm feeling that way. Anyhow ... I remember he said, 'Don't worry, your father will come to get you. I know him ... I know he'll be here in the morning. He won't leave you out here ... no matter what, he'd never do that.'"

"And ..." he was almost overcome with curiosity.

"That's what's kind of funny, Dad. I asked him if he knew you and he said to me that he did ... that you and he were ... he used a word I heard you use once ... that you and he were ... um ... 'survers' of something ... something like that ... I can't quite remember."

He stopped walking, the street suddenly quiet. Early morning delivery trucks and commuters hurrying to their jobs in the heart of the city drove by in total silence. The pigeons flapping around on the sidewalk were mute, and the huge jetliner floating overhead was but a noiseless apparition.

"Did he say we were 'survivors,' Pun'kin? Was that the word he used?"

"Yes, Daddy, how'd you know? He said you were survivors of ... survivors of something called Vietnam ..."

"Viet Nam ... Viet Nam," he gently corrected her, the far away look in his eyes somehow an answer to all of the questions she had wanted to ask.

"That's it! And he said that you were his brother ... when I told him about your building he said he knew you and that the two of you were brothers! I didn't know you had a brother, Dad ... is he my uncle?"

"No, darling, I didn't have a brother. I had a lot of brothers ... lots of them. And, yes, he would be your uncle."

She accepted the tears pouring from his face for what they were, a gift of his love. "But, Daddy ... what was he doing in that alley. Why did he live there? How come he didn't have a building like you? Why was he there last night?"

The traffic noise began to fill his ears, replacing the pain filled cries of the wounded which had begun to ring in his head. He stared into her innocent eyes, tearing his gaze from the dark jungle foliage that had suddenly appeared in front of him, and held her even tighter.

"Why was he there Daddy, why?"

"He was there to save you, my child ... he was there to save you. That's why he was in the alley ... to save you."

"Oh," she accepted his answer, as confusing as it was she knew it to be true ... he never lied to her. "Will we ever see him again, Dad?"

"We'll try, Pun'kin, we'll try," he motioned his secretary to his side, noticing that she was already writing notes onto her pad. Behind him the security guard had begun to issue orders into her tiny microphone, commands which within minutes would be causing all the tremendous resources at his disposal to begin to attempt to successfully complete yet another task he'd assigned them.

They approached the entrance to his building, it had never looked so tall and clean to her before. He glanced back one last time towards the block of buildings at the bottom of the hill, then turned to his secretary, "Make a note, please. Call the people over at the Veteran's Shelter ... tell 'em I'd like to arrange a meeting ... oh, let's call it sometime towards the end of this week. I want the mayor to join us, he'll ..."

"He'll be pretty hard to get, Sir, he's right in the middle of his re-election campaign, you know."

He grinned, "Yea, I know ... that'll make him even easier to get, believe me. Just say to him, 'Ralph ... how many zero's you interested in?' He'll be there, for sure he'll join us."

She laughed, having learned a long time ago the lesson of the zero. "Is there anything else?" She asked, already having detected in his glance towards the old section of town that there was more to come.

"Yea ... get the legal people up to my office after lunch ... and ... and my special projects director ... and, well, you know, the ..."

"I know, the usual crew that's going to tell you all the reasons you can't and shouldn't do something ... right?" But she was already talking to his back as he headed towards the building, still holding tightly to his daughter.

As he carried to the front entrance to this building he looked down and tenderly whispered to her, "Well, Pun'kin, looks like you're going to have figure a way to apologize to Miss Miller."

"Then what, Daddy?"

"Then ... why after that, I'm ... no ... we're going to put together a building."

"What kind of building, Daddy?"

"A wonderful building, my daughter ... a wonderful building."

And with that, they entered the shining tower

"What is it, Charlie?"

"Oh, they found another one down by the old gas company. Just another old homeless guy, it looks like."

"That's the third one this week." He took a quick glance at the clipboard hanging next to his desk. thinking of the unusually chilly nights that they'd been experiencing of late, "Do you think it was exposure, like the other two?"

"Nah, this one had a six inch long slash in his side. Kids that found him said he was almost frozen solid. Ambulance guy told me that there wasn't much blood left in his body. He must have just wandered in a daze until it'd all pumped out of him, then he just dropped."

"Yech. What'a we do with him?"

"Ah ... you know, there's going to be a real jam in here later on when they start to bring in what was left behind from that big gang fight uptown last night. Nobody's going to be looking for him, so how about we just bag him up and paper whip the whole thing. We can get him out to the city ground with this morning's pickup, then 'John Doe' the forms after the required three days are up."

"Is that ... like, is that okay?"

"How much they paying us for overtime right now?"

"I get your point ... right." With that he pushed the metal stretcher containing the body into the corner of the room adjacent to the loading platform.

When the gurney bumped against the far wall of the room neither of them noticed the slight sound the set of dog tags made inside the plastic bag as they slid down to rest against the back of the soldier's neck. Nor would the young pimple-faced kid who loaded the body into the truck notice them when they rattled into a new position. And not the two old men who carried the body from the truck to the gravesite far from the center of the city. Nor did the two young muscular Latino men who lowered him into the ground. And, with the noise of his powerful diesel engine loud in his ears, the backhoe driver who covered the bag with dirt never heard a thing.

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