

Praise for Harlan Coben

‘It is always satisfying to discover a new crime writer – and this is the business . . . this book will keep you up until 2 a.m.’ *The Times*

‘Harlan Coben. He’s smart, he’s funny, and he has something to say’ Michael Connelly

‘An increasingly frightening conspiracy with an unguessable ending . . . hard to put down’ *Sunday Telegraph*

‘At last a British publisher has given British readers the chance to discover something every US mystery fan already knows – that Harlan Coben is one of the most entertaining and intriguing crime writers around’

Val McDermid, *Manchester Evening Guardian*

‘What sets Harlan Coben above the crowd are wit and . . . an entertaining plot’

Los Angeles Times Book Review

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‘Coben . . . scores a hole in one! The characters are deftly etched and the details keenly observed’

Publishers Weekly

‘Coben is still one of America’s masters of the hook, the twist and the surprise ending’ *Literary Review*

By Harlan Coben

Play Dead
Miracle Cure
Deal Breaker
Drop Shot
Fade Away
Back Spin
One False Move
The Final Detail
Darkest Fear
Tell No One
Gone for Good
No Second Chance
Just One Look
The Innocent
Promise Me
The Woods
Hold Tight
Long Lost
Caught

Harlan Coben is the most exciting talent in crime writing. His most recent novels, *Caught*, *Long Lost* and *Hold Tight*, were all international bestsellers, hitting the charts of the *Sunday Times*, the *New York Times*, *Le Monde* and many others throughout the world. His books are published in over forty languages and there are more than 47 million of his novels in print worldwide. He was the first ever author to win all three major US crime awards, and he established a bestselling series of crime novels starring his powerful creation Myron Bolitar before turning to stand-alone books. Harlan lives in New Jersey with his wife and four children. Visit his website at www.harlancoben.com

Miracle Cure

HARLAN COBEN



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For Corky,
The best mommy in the world

Introduction

Okay, if this is the first book of mine you're going to try, stop now. Return it. Grab another. It's okay. I'll wait.

If you're still here, please know that I haven't read *Miracle Cure* in at least twenty years. I didn't want to rewrite it and pass it off as a new book. I hate when authors do that. So, this is, for better or worse, the exact book I wrote when I was in my early twenties, just a naive lad working in the travel industry and wondering if I should follow my father and brother and go to (shudder) law school.

I'm hard on it, but aren't we all hard on our early stuff? Remember that essay you wrote when you were in school, the one that got you an A-plus, the one your teacher called 'inspired' – and one day you're going through your drawer and you find it and you read it and your heart sinks and you say,

‘Man, what was I thinking?’ That’s how it is with early novels sometimes.

This one is a bit preachy in spots and sometimes dated (though, in truth, I wish the medical stuff was more dated, but that’s another matter). And you might think I based part of this on a real-life situation. I didn’t. This book predates that event. I won’t say more, because it could be a spoiler.

Finally, flawed and all, I love this book. There is an energy and risk-taking in *Miracle Cure* that I wonder if I still have. I’m not this guy anymore, but that’s okay. None of us are stagnant with our passion and our work. That’s a good thing.

Enjoy.

Harlan Coben

Prologue

Friday, August 30

Dr Bruce Grey tried not to walk too fast. He slowed his pace, fighting off the temptation to sprint across the soiled floor of Kennedy Airport's International Arrivals Building, past the customs officials, and out into the humid night air. His eyes shifted from side to side. Every few steps he would feign a soreness in his neck to give himself the opportunity to glance behind him and make sure he was not being followed.

Stop it! Bruce told himself. Stop lurking around like a poor man's James Bond. You're shaking like a malaria patient, for chrissake. You couldn't look more conspicuous if you wore a sign.

He strolled past the luggage carousel, nodding politely at the little old lady who had sat next to him on the flight. The old woman had not shut her mouth during the entire trip, gabbing on about her family, her love of flying, her last trip overseas. She was sweet enough, just somebody's grandmother, but Bruce still closed his eyes and

pretended to be asleep in order to get a little peace and quiet. But, of course, sleep had not come to him. It would not come for some time yet.

But maybe she wasn't just some sweet, little old lady, Brucie boy. Maybe she was following you . . .

He dismissed the voice with a nervous shake of the head. This whole thing was turning his brain into sewer sludge. First, he was sure that the bearded man on the plane had been following him. Then it was the big guy with the slicked-back hair and Armani suit at the telephone booth. And don't forget the pretty blonde by the terminal exit. She had been following him too.

Now it was a little old lady.

Get a grip on yourself, Brucie. Paranoia is not what we need right now. Clear thinking, old pal – that's what we're looking for.

Bruce moved past the luggage carousel and over to the customs official.

'Passport, please.'

Bruce handed the man his passport.

'No luggage, sir?'

He shook his head. 'Only this carry-on.'

The customs officer glanced at the passport and then at Bruce. 'You look quite different from your photograph.'

Bruce tried to force a tired smile to his lips but it would not hold. The humidity was almost unbearable. His dress shirt was pasted against his skin, his tie loosened to the point of being nearly untied. Beads of perspiration dotted his forehead. 'I . . . I've gone through a few changes.'

'A few? You're a dark-haired man with a beard in this picture.'

'I know—'

'Now you're a clean-shaven blond.'

‘Like I said, I went through a few changes.’ *Luckily, you can’t tell eye color from a passport photo or you would want to know why I changed my eyes from brown to blue.*

The customs official did not appear convinced. ‘Were you traveling on business or pleasure?’

‘Pleasure.’

‘You always pack this lightly?’

Bruce swallowed and managed a shrug. ‘I hate waiting for checked luggage.’

The customs official swung his line of vision from the passport photograph to Bruce’s face and then back again. ‘Would you open your bag, please?’

Bruce could barely keep his hands steady enough to set the combination. It took him three tries before it finally snapped open. ‘There you go.’

The customs official’s eyes narrowed into thin slits as he rummaged through the belongings. ‘What are these?’ he asked.

Bruce closed his eyes, his breath coming in short gasps. ‘Some files.’

‘I can see that,’ the official replied. ‘What are they for?’

‘I’m a doctor,’ Bruce explained, his voice cracking. ‘I wanted to review some of my patients’ charts while I was away.’

‘Do you always do that when you’re on vacation?’

‘Not always.’

‘What type of doctor are you?’

‘An internist at Columbia Presbyterian,’ Bruce replied, telling a half-truth. He decided to leave out the fact that he was also an expert in public health and epidemiology.

‘I see,’ the official replied. ‘I wish my doctor was that dedicated.’

Again Bruce tried to smile. Again it was a failed attempt.

‘And this sealed envelope?’

Bruce felt his whole body quake. ‘Excuse me?’

‘What is in this manila envelope?’

He willed a casual look on his face. ‘Oh, that’s just some medical information I’m sending to a colleague,’ he managed.

The customs official’s eyes locked onto Bruce’s blood-shot ones for a few long moments. ‘I see,’ he said, slowly putting the envelope back in the bag. When the customs official finished going through the rest of the carry-on, he signed Bruce’s customs declaration and handed him back his passport. ‘Give the card to the woman on your way out.’

Bruce reached for the bag. ‘Thank you.’

‘And, Doctor?’

Bruce looked up.

‘You might want to visit one of your colleagues,’ the customs official said. ‘If you don’t mind a layman giving medical opinions, you look awful.’

‘I’ll do that.’

Bruce lifted the bag and glanced behind him. The little old lady was still waiting for her luggage. The man with the beard and the pretty blonde were nowhere in sight. The big guy in the Armani suit was still talking on the phone.

Bruce moved away from the customs desk. His right hand gripped his bag with excessive vigor; his left hand rubbed his face. He handed the customs declaration to the woman and walked through the sliding glass doors into the waiting area. A sea of anxious faces greeted him. People stood on their toes, peering out from all points

with each swish of the glass doors before lowering their heads in disappointment when an unfamiliar face approached the threshold.

Bruce moved steadily past the waiting friends and relatives, past the bored limousine drivers with name signs held up against their chests. He made his way to the Japan Air Lines ticket counter on the right.

‘Is there a mailbox near here?’ he asked.

‘To your right,’ the woman replied. ‘By the Air France desk.’

‘Thank you.’

He walked by a garbage can and casually dropped his torn-up boarding pass into it. He had considered himself very clever to book the flight under an assumed name – very clever, that is, until he got to the airport and was informed that you could not have an international ticket issued under a different name than the one on your passport.

Whoops.

Luckily, there had been plenty of space on the flight. Even though he had to purchase another ticket for himself, reserving one under an alias had not been such a dumb idea. Before his actual departure date, no one could have found out what flight he was booked on because his name was not in the computer. Pure genius on his part.

Yessiree, Brucie. You are a regular genius.

Yeah, right. Genius. Bullshit.

He located the mail slot near the Air France desk. A few passengers spoke to the airline representative. None of them paid him the slightest attention. His eyes quickly checked the room. The old lady, the bearded man, and the pretty blonde had either left or were still going through customs. The only ‘spy’ he could still see was the big guy

in the Armani suit who now moved hurriedly through the sliding glass doors and out of the terminal.

Bruce let loose a sigh of relief. No one was looking at him now. He turned his attention back to the mail slot. His hand reached into his bag and quickly slipped the sealed manila envelope down the chute. His insurance policy was safely on its way.

Now what?

He certainly could not go home. If anyone was searching for him, his apartment on the Upper West Side would be the first place they would look. The clinic was no good at this hour of the night, either. Someone could nab him there just as easily.

Look, I'm not very good at this. I'm just your average run-of-the-mill doctor who went to college, went to medical school, got married, had a kid, finished residency, got divorced, lost custody of the kid, and now works too hard. I'm not up to playing I Spy.

But what other choice did he have? He could go to the police, but who would believe him? He had no real evidence yet. Hell, he wasn't even sure what was going on himself. What could he tell the police?

Try this on for size, Bruce: 'Help! Protect me! Two people have already been murdered and countless others may join them – including me!'

Maybe true. Maybe not. Question: what did he really know for sure? Answer: not a hell of a lot. More like nothing. By going to the police, Bruce knew he would do little more than destroy the clinic and all the important work they had accomplished there. He had dedicated the last three years to that research and he was not about to give those damn bigots the weapon they needed to kill the project. No, he would have to handle it a different way.

But how?

He checked once more to make sure he was not being followed. All his enemy spies were gone now. That was good. That was a nice bit of relief. He hailed a yellow taxi and jumped into the backseat.

‘Where to?’

Bruce thought for a moment, mulling over every thriller he had ever read. Where would George Smiley go, or better still, Travis McGee or Spenser? ‘The Plaza, please.’

The taxi pulled away. Bruce watched out the back window. No cars seemed to be following as the taxi began its journey down the Van Wyck Expressway toward Manhattan. Bruce settled back, letting his head rest against the seat. He tried to breathe deeply and relax, but he still found himself trembling in fear.

Think, goddamn it. This is no time to catnap.

First, he needed a new alias. His eyes moved left and right, finally resting on the taxi driver’s name on the displayed license. Benjamin Johnson. Bruce turned the name around. John Benson. That would be his name until tomorrow. John Benson. Just until tomorrow. Now if he could just stay alive until then . . .

He dared not think that far ahead.

Everyone at the clinic thought he was still on vacation in Cancún, Mexico. No one – absolutely no one – knew the whole vacation idea was merely a diversion. Bruce had played the role of happy traveler to the utmost. He had bought beachwear, flown down to Cancún last Friday, checked into the Cancún Oasis Hotel, prepaid for the week, and told the concierge that he would be renting a boat and could not be reached. Then he shaved his beard, cut and bleached his hair, and put on blue-tinted contact lenses. Even Bruce had trouble recognizing the image in

the mirror. He returned to the airport, left Mexico, checked in at his true destination under the name Rex Veneto, and began to investigate his horrible suspicions.

The truth, however, appeared to be more shocking than he had imagined.

The taxi slowed now in front of the Plaza Hotel on Fifth Avenue. The lights of Central Park twinkled from across the street and to the north. Bruce paid the driver, tipping him no more or less than the proper amount, and strolled into the lush lobby of the hotel. Despite his designer suit, he felt conspicuously sloppy. His jacket was heavily creased, his pants completely wrinkled. He looked like something left in the bottom of a laundry hamper for a week – hardly what his mother would have called presentable.

He began to walk toward the reception desk when something he barely spotted out of the corner of his eye made him stop.

It's just your imagination, Bruce. It's not the same guy. It can't be.

Bruce felt his pulse quicken. He spun around, but the big guy in the Armani suit was nowhere in sight. Had he really seen the same man? Probably not, but there was no reason to take chances. He left the hotel by the back entrance and walked toward the subway. He purchased a token, took the 1 train down to Fourteenth Street, switched to the A train to Forty-second Street, cut cross town on the 7 train, jumping off the car seconds before the doors closed at Third Avenue. He changed trains haphazardly for another half an hour, jumping on or off at the last possible second each time, before ending up on Fifty-sixth Street and Eighth Avenue. Then 'John Benson'

walked a few blocks and checked into the Days Inn, a hotel where Dr Bruce Grey had never stayed.

When he got up to his room on the eleventh floor, he locked the door and slid the chain into place.

Now what?

A phone call was risky, but Bruce decided to take the chance. He would speak to Harvey for only a few moments, then hang up. He picked up the phone and dialed his partner's home phone. Harvey answered on the second ring.

'Hello?'

'Harvey, it's me.'

'Bruce?' Harvey sounded surprised. 'How's everything in Cancún?'

Bruce ignored the question. 'I need to speak to you.'

'Christ, you sound awful. What's wrong?'

Bruce closed his eyes. 'Not over the phone.'

'What are you talking about?' Harvey asked. 'Are you still—?'

'Not over the phone,' he repeated. 'I'll talk to you tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow? What the hell is going—?'

'Don't ask me any more questions. I'll meet you tomorrow morning at six-thirty.'

'Where?'

'At the clinic.'

'Jesus, are you in danger? Is this about the murders?'

'I can't talk anymo—'

Click.

Bruce froze. There was a noise at his door.

'Bruce?' Harvey cried. 'What is it? What's going on?'

Bruce's heart began to race. His eyes never left the

door. 'Tomorrow,' he whispered. 'I'll explain everything then.'

'But—'

He gently replaced the receiver, cutting Harvey off.

I'm not up for this. Oh, please, God, let my mind be playing tricks on me, I'm not up for this, I'm really not up for any of this . . .

There was no other sound, and for a brief moment Bruce wondered if his overactive brain cells had indeed imagined the whole thing. Maybe there had been no sound at all. And if there had been a noise, what was so strange about that? He was staying in a New York hotel, for chrissake, not a soundproof studio. Maybe it was just a maid. Maybe it was just a bellhop.

Maybe it was just a big guy with slicked-back hair and a custom-made, silk Armani suit.

Bruce crept toward the door. The right leg slid forward, then the left tagged along. He had never been much of an athlete, had never been the most coordinated guy in the world. Right now, it looked like he was doing some kind of spastic foxtrot.

Click.

His heart slammed into his throat. His legs went weak. There was no mistaking where the sound had come from this time.

His door.

He stood frozen. His breathing reverberated in his ears so damn loudly that he was sure everyone on the floor could hear it.

Click.

A short, quick click. Not a fumbling sound, but a very precise click.

Run, Bruce. Run and hide.

But where? He was in a small room on the eleventh floor of a hotel. Where the hell was he supposed to run and hide? He took another step toward the door.

I can open it quickly, scream my brains out, and run down the hall like an escaped psych patient. I could—

The knock came so suddenly that Bruce nearly screamed.

‘Who is it?’ he practically shouted.

‘Towels,’ a man’s voice said.

Bruce moved closer to the door. Towels, my ass. ‘Don’t need any,’ he called out without opening the door.

Pause. ‘Okay. Good night, sir.’

He could hear Mr Towel’s footsteps move away from his door. Bruce pressed his back against the wall and continued to make his way to the door. His whole body shook. Despite the room’s powerful air conditioning, sweat drenched his clothing and matted his hair down against his forehead.

Now what?

The peephole, Mr James Friggin’ Bond. Look through the peephole.

Bruce obeyed the voice within his head. He slowly turned and put his eye against the peephole. Nothing. Nada, as the Mexicans say. There was no one there, not a damn thing. He tried to look to his left and then his right—

And that was when the door flew open.

The chain broke as though it were a thread. The metal knob slammed against the point of Bruce’s hip. Pain shot through the whole area. Instinctively he tried to cover his hip with his hand. That proved to be a mistake. From behind the door a large fist came flying toward Bruce’s face. He tried to duck, but his reflexes were too slow. The

knuckles landed with a horrid thud against the bridge of Bruce's nose, crushing the bones and cartilage. Blood flowed quickly from his nostrils.

Oh, Jesus, oh, sweet God . . .

Bruce stumbled back, reaching for his nose. The big guy in the Armani suit stepped into the room and closed the door. He moved with a speed and grace that defied his great bulk.

'Please—' Bruce managed before a powerful hand the size of a boxer's glove clamped over his mouth, silencing him. The hand carelessly knocked against the flattened nostrils, pushing them upward and sending hot surges of pain through his face.

The man smiled and nodded politely as if they had just been introduced at a cocktail party. Then he lifted his foot and threw a kick with expert precision. The blow shattered Bruce's kneecap. Bruce heard the sharp cracking noise as the bone below the knee snapped. His scream was muffled by the man's hand tightening against his mouth. Then the giant hand pulled back just slightly before slamming up into Bruce's jaw, fracturing another bone and cracking several teeth. Gripping the broken jaw with his fingers, the man reached into Bruce's mouth and pulled down hard. The pain was enormous, overwhelming. Bruce could feel the tendons in his mouth ripping away.

Oh, God, please . . .

The big man in the Armani suit let Bruce slide to the floor like a sack of potatoes. Bruce's head swam. He watched through a murky haze as the big man examined a blood stain on his suit. The man seemed annoyed by the stain, upset that it would not come out at the dry cleaner.

With a shake of his head, the man moved toward the window and pulled back the curtain.

‘You picked a nice, high floor,’ he said casually. ‘That will make things easier.’

The big man turned away from the window. He strolled back toward where Bruce lay writhing. He bent down, took a solid hold on Bruce’s foot and gently lifted Bruce’s shattered leg into the air. The agony was unbearable. Jolts of pain wracked his body with each slight movement of the broken limb.

Please, God, please let me pass out . . .

Suddenly Bruce realized what the man was about to do. He wanted to ask him what he wanted, wanted to offer the man everything he had, wanted to beg the man for mercy, but his damaged mouth could only produce a gurgling noise. Bruce could only look up hopelessly with pleading, terror-filled eyes. Blood streamed down his face and onto his neck and chest.

Through a cloud of pain Bruce saw the look in the man’s eyes. It was not a wild-eyed, crazed look; not a hateful, bloodthirsty look; not the stare of a psychotic killer. The man was calm. Busy. A man performing a tedious task. Detached. Unemotional.

This is nothing to this guy, Bruce thought. Another day at the office.

The man reached into his jacket pocket and tossed a pen and a piece of paper on the floor. Then he gripped Bruce’s foot, one hand on the heel, the other on the toes. Bruce bucked in uncontrollable agony. The man’s muscles flexed before he finally spoke.

‘I’m going to twist your foot all the way around,’ the big man said, ‘until your toes are pointed toward your back and that broken bone rips through the skin.’ He

paused, gave a distracted smile, and repositioned his fingers in order to get a better grip.

‘I’ll let go when you finish writing your suicide note, okay?’

Bruce made the note brief.

Chapter 1

Saturday, September 14

Sara Lowell glanced at her wristwatch. In twenty minutes she would make her national television debut in front of thirty million people. An hour later her future would be decided.

Twenty minutes.

She swallowed, stood slowly, and readjusted her leg brace. Her chest hitched with each breath. She had to move around, had to do something before she went nuts. The metal of the brace rubbed against her, chafing the skin. After all these years Sara still could not get used to the clumsy artificial constraint. The limp, yes. The limp had been with her for as long as she could remember. It felt almost natural to her. But the bulky brace was still something she wanted to toss in a river.

She took a deep breath, willed herself to relax, and then checked her makeup in the mirror. Her face looked somewhat pale, but that was nothing new. Like the limp, she was used to that. Her honey-blonde hair was swept back

from her beautiful, delicate features and large doll-like green eyes. Her mouth was wide, her lips sensual and full to the point where they looked almost swollen. She took off her wire-rimmed spectacles and cleaned the lenses. One of the producers walked over to her.

‘Ready, Sara?’ he asked.

‘Whenever you are,’ she said with a weak smile.

‘Good. You’re on with Donald in fifteen minutes.’

Sara looked at her costar, Donald Parker. At sixty he was double her age and a billion times more experienced. He had been on *NewsFlash* since the early years, before the fantastic Nielsen ratings and a market share that no news show had ever seen before or since. Simply put, Donald Parker was a legend in television journalism.

What the hell do I think I’m doing? I’m not ready for something like this.

Sara nervously scanned her material for the millionth time. The words began to blur. Once again she wondered how she had gotten this far so fast. Her mind flashed through her college years, her column in the *New York Herald*, her work on cable television, her debates on public TV. With each step up the ladder, Sara had questioned her ability to climb any higher. She had been enraged by the jealous chatter of her colleagues, the cruel voices that whispered, ‘I wish my relatives were famous . . . Who did she sleep with? . . . It’s that damn limp.’

But no, the truth of the matter was much more simple: the public adored her. Even when she got rough or sarcastic with a guest, the audience could not get enough of her. True, her father was the former surgeon general and her husband was a basketball star, and maybe her childhood pain and her physical beauty had also helped

her along the way. But Sara remembered what her first boss had told her:

‘No one can survive in this business on looks alone. If anything they’re a drawback. People will have a preconceived notion that because you’re a beautiful blonde you can’t be too bright. I know it’s unfair, Sara, but that’s the way it is. You can’t just be as good as the competition – you have to be better. Otherwise they’re going to label you an airhead. You’ll get blown off the stage if you’re not the brightest person out there.’

Sara repeated the words like some battle cry, but her confidence refused to leave the trenches. Her debut tonight featured a report on the financial improprieties of Reverend Ernest Sanders, the televangelist, founder of the Holy Crusade – a big, slippery (read: slimy) fish. In fact, the Reverend Sanders had agreed to appear for a live interview after the report was aired to answer the charges – on the condition, of course, that *NewsFlash* display his 800 number on the screen. Sara had tried to make her story as evenhanded as possible. She merely stated facts, with a minimum of innuendo and conclusions. But deep inside Sara knew the truth about the Reverend Ernest Sanders. There was just no avoiding it.

The man was pure scum.

The studio bustled with activity. Technicians read meters and adjusted lights. Cameramen swung their lenses into place. The teleprompter was being tested, no more than three words to a line so that the audience at home would not see the anchor’s eyes shifting. Directors, producers, engineers, and gofers scrambled back and forth across a set that looked like a large family room with no ceiling and only one wall, as though some giant

had ripped apart the outside so he could peer in. A man Sara did not recognize rushed toward her.

'Here you go,' he said. The man handed her several sheets of paper.

'What's this?' she asked.

'Papers.'

'No, I mean what are they for?'

He shrugged. 'To shuffle.'

'Shuffle?'

'Yeah, you know, like when you break for a commercial and the camera pulls away. You shuffle them.'

'I do?'

'Makes you look important,' he assured her before rushing off.

She shook her head. Alas, so much to learn.

Without conscious thought, Sara began to sing quietly. She usually restricted her singing to the shower or the car, preferably accompanied by a very loud radio, but occasionally, when she was nervous, she began to sing in public. Loudly.

When she got to the chorus of 'Tattoo Vampire' ('*Vampire photo suckin' the skin*'), her voice rose and she started playing the air guitar. Really into it now. Getting down.

A moment later she realized that people were staring at her.

She lowered her hands back to her sides, dropping her well-tuned air guitar into oblivion. The song faded from her lips. She smiled, shrugged. 'Uh – sorry?'

The crew returned to work without so much as a second glance. Air guitar gone, Sara tried to think about something both distracting and comforting.

Michael immediately came to mind. She wondered

what Michael was doing right now. He was probably jogging home from basketball practice. She pictured all six feet five of him opening the door, a white towel draped around his neck, sweat bleeding through his gray practice jersey. He always wore the craziest shorts – loud orange or yellow or pink Hawaiian ones that came down to his knees, or some whacko-designed jams. Without breaking stride, he would jog past the expensive piano and into the den. He would turn on a little Bach, veer toward the kitchen, pour himself a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, and then drink half of it in one gulp. Then he would collapse into the reclining chair and let the chamber music sweep him away.

Michael.

Another tap on her shoulder. ‘Telephone call.’ The same man who had handed her the sheets of paper handed her a portable telephone.

She took the phone. ‘Hello?’

‘Did you start singing yet?’

She broke into a smile. It was Michael.

‘Blue Öyster Cult?’ he asked.

‘Yeah.’

‘Let me guess.’ Michael thought a moment. ‘“Don’t Fear the Reaper”?’

‘No, “Tattoo Vampire.”’

‘God, how awful. So what are you up to now?’

Sara closed her eyes. She could feel herself beginning to relax. ‘Not much. I’m just hanging around the set, waiting to go on.’

‘Play any air guitar?’

‘Of course not,’ she said. ‘I’m a professional journalist, for God’s sake.’

‘Uh-huh. So how nervous are you?’

‘I feel pretty calm actually,’ she replied.
‘Liar.’
‘All right, I’m scared out of my mind. Happy?’
‘Ecstatic,’ he replied. ‘But remember one thing.’
‘What?’
‘You’re always scared before you go on the air. The more scared you are, the more you kick ass.’
‘You think so?’
‘I know so,’ he said. ‘This poor guy will never know what hit him.’
‘Really?’ she asked, her face beginning to beam.
‘Yeah, really,’ he said. ‘Now let me ask you a quick question: do we have to go to your father’s gala tonight?’
‘Let me give you a quick answer: yes.’
‘Black tie?’ Michael asked.
‘Another yes.’
‘These big stuffy affairs can be so boring.’
‘Tell me about it.’
He paused. ‘Can I at least have my way with you during the party?’
‘Who knows?’ Sara answered. ‘You may get lucky.’ She cradled the phone between her neck and shoulder for a moment. ‘Is Harvey coming to the party tonight?’
‘I’m going to pick him up on my way.’
‘Good. I know he doesn’t get along with my father—’
‘You mean your father doesn’t get along with him,’ Michael corrected.
‘Whatever. Will you talk to him tonight?’
‘About what?’
‘Don’t play games with me, Michael,’ she said. ‘I’m worried about your health.’
‘Listen, with Bruce’s death and all the problems at the

clinic, Harv has enough on his mind right now. I don't want to bother him.'

'Has he spoken to you yet about Bruce's suicide?' Sara asked.

'Not a word,' Michael said. 'To be honest, I'm kind of worried about him. He never leaves the lab anymore. He works all day and night.'

'Harvey has always been that way.'

'I know, but it's different this time.'

'Give him a little more time, Michael. Bruce has been dead only two weeks.'

'It's more than just Bruce.'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't know. Something to do with the clinic, I guess.'

'Michael, please talk to him about your stomach.'

'Sara . . .'

'Talk to him tonight . . . for me.'

'Okay,' he agreed reluctantly.

'Promise?'

'Yes, I promise. And Sara?'

'What is it?'

'Kick some Southern-fried reverend ass.'

'I love you, Michael.'

'I love you too.'

Sara felt a tap on her shoulder. 'Ten minutes.'

'I have to go,' she said.

'Until tonight then,' he said. 'When I have my way with a famous TV star in her childhood bedroom.'

'Dream on.'

A sharp pain ripped across Michael Silverman's abdomen again as he replaced the receiver. He bent over, his hand clutched under his ribcage, his face scrunched into a

grimace. His stomach had been bothering him on and off for weeks now. At first he had thought it was just a flu, but now he was not so sure. The ache was becoming unbearable. Even the thought of food now made his stomach perform backflips.

Beethoven's Seventh Symphony drifted across the room like a welcome breeze. Michael closed his eyes, allowing the melody to work like a gentle masseur against his aching muscles. His teammates gave him unlimited shit about his musical taste. Reece Porter, the black power forward who co-captained the New York Knicks with Michael, was always goofing on him.

'How can you listen to this shit, Mikey?' he would ask. 'There's no beat, no rhythm.'

'I realize that the musical ear of a Chopin does not compare with that of MC Hammer,' Michael would reply, 'but try to be open-minded. Just listen, Reece. Let the notes flow over you.'

Reece paused and listened for a moment. 'I feel like I'm trapped in a dentist's office. How does this shit get you psyched for a big game? You can't dance to it or anything.'

'Ah, but just listen.'

'It doesn't have lyrics,' Reece said.

'And your noise pollution does? You can understand the words over all that racket?'

Reece laughed. 'Mikey, you're a typical whitey snob,' he said.

'I prefer the term pompous honky ass, thank you.'

Good ol' Reece. Michael held a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, but the thought of even a sip nauseated him. Last year the knee, and now the stomach. It didn't make sense. Michael had always been the healthiest guy in the

league. He had gone through his first ten NBA seasons without a scratch before tearing apart his knee a little more than a year ago. It was tough enough trying to bounce back from reconstructive knee surgery at his age . . . the last thing he needed was this mystery stomach ailment.

Putting down his glass, Michael moved across the room and made sure the VCR was set. Then he turned off the stereo and turned on the television. Sara would be making her *NewsFlash* debut in a matter of minutes. Michael fidgeted in his seat. He twisted his wedding band around and around and then rubbed his face. He tried to relax, but, like Sara, he couldn't. There was no reason to be nervous, he reminded himself. Everything he had said to Sara on the phone was true. She was an amazing reporter, the best. Very sharp and quick. Well prepared and yet spontaneous. A bit of wise-ass sometimes. A sense of humor when it was called for. A bulldog almost always.

Michael had learned firsthand how tough an interviewer Sara could be. They had met six years ago when she was assigned to interview him for the *New York Herald* two days before the start of the NBA finals. She was supposed to do a personal, non-sports-related piece on his life off the court. Michael did not like that. He did not want his personal life, especially his past, splashed across the headlines. It was none of anybody's business, Michael told Sara, resorting to more colorful terms to get his point across and then slamming down the phone for emphasis. But Sara Lowell was not so easily thwarted. To be more precise, Sara Lowell did not know how to give up. She wanted the interview. She went after it.

A jolt of pain knocked aside the memory. Michael

clenched his lower abdomen and doubled over on the couch. He held on and waited. The pain subsided slowly.

What the hell is wrong with me?

He leaned back, glancing at the photograph of Sara and himself on the shelf behind the TV. He stared at the picture now, watching himself hunched over Sara with his arms locked around her small waist. She looked so tiny, so achingly beautiful, so goddamn fragile. He often wondered what it was that made Sara appear so innocent, so delicate. Certainly not her figure. Despite the limp, Sara worked out three times a week. Her body was small, taut, athletic – dynamite might be a better way to describe it. Sexy as hell. Michael examined the photograph again, trying to look at his wife objectively. Some would say it was her pale porcelain complexion that accounted for her unaffected appearance, but that wasn't what it was. Her eyes, Michael thought now, those large green eyes that reflected frailty and gentleness while maintaining the ability to be cunning and probing. They were trusting eyes and eyes you could trust. A man could bathe in those eyes, disappear forever, lose his soul for all eternity.

They were also sexy as hell.

The phone interrupted his thoughts. Michael reached behind him and grabbed the receiver. 'Hello?'

'Hi, Michael.'

'How's it going, Harvey?'

'Not bad. Look, Michael, I don't want to keep you. I know the show is about to go on.'

'We got a couple of minutes.' There was a crashing sound in the background. 'What's all that noise? You still at the clinic?'

'Yep,' Harvey replied.

'When was the last time you got some sleep?'

'You my mother?'

'Just asking,' Michael said. 'I thought I was going to pick you up at your apartment.'

'I didn't have a chance to get out of here,' Harvey said. 'I had one of the nurses rent me a tux and bring it here. It's just so busy right now. Eric and I are swamped. Without Bruce here.'

Harvey stopped.

There was a moment of silence.

'I still don't get it, Harv,' said Michael carefully, hoping his friend was finally ready to talk about Bruce's suicide.

'Neither do I,' Harvey said flatly. Then he added, 'Listen, I need to ask you something.'

'Shoot.'

'Is Sara going to be at the benefit tonight?'

'She'll be a little late.'

'But she'll be there?'

Michael recognized the urgency in his old friend's voice. He had known Harvey almost twenty-four years, since a second-year intern named Dr Harvey Riker took care of an eight-year-old Michael Silverman, who had been rushed to Saint Barnabas Hospital with a concussion and broken arm.

'Of course she'll be there.'

'Good. I'll see you tonight then.'

Michael stared at the receiver, puzzled. 'Is everything all right, Harv?'

'Fine,' he mumbled.

'Then what's with the cloak-and-dagger phone call?'

'It's just . . . nothing. I'll explain later. What time you picking me up?'

'Nine-fifteen. Is Eric coming?'

‘No,’ Harvey said. ‘One of us has to run the store. I have to go, Michael. I’ll see you at nine-fifteen.’

The phone clicked in Michael’s ear.

Dr Harvey Riker replaced the receiver. He sighed heavily and put a hand through his long, unruly, gray-brown hair, a cross between Albert Einstein’s and Art Garfunkel’s. He looked every bit of his fifty years. His muscle had turned to flab from lack of exercise. His face was average to the point of tedium. Never much of a hunk to begin with, Harvey’s looks had soured over the years like a two-dollar Chianti.

He opened his desk drawer, poured himself a quick shot of whiskey, and downed it in one gulp. His hands shook. He was scared.

There is only one thing to do. I have to talk to Sara. It’s the only way. And after that . . .

Better not to think about it.

Harvey swiveled his chair around to look at the three photographs on his credenza. He picked up the one on the far right, the picture of Harvey standing next to his partner and friend, Bruce Grey.

Poor Bruce.

The two police detectives had listened to Harvey’s suspicions politely, nodded in unison, jotted down notes. When Harvey tried to explain that Bruce Grey would never have committed suicide, they listened politely, nodded in unison, jotted down notes. When he told them Bruce had called him on the phone the same night he leaped from the eleventh-floor window at the Days Inn, they listened politely, nodded in unison, jotted down notes . . . and concluded that Dr Bruce Grey had committed suicide.

A suicide note had been found at the scene, the detectives reminded him. A handwriting expert had confirmed that Bruce Grey had written it. This case was open and shut.

Open and shut.

The second picture frame on the credenza held a photograph of Jennifer, his former wife of twenty-six years, who had just walked out on him forever. The third photograph was that of his younger brother Sidney, whose death from AIDS three years ago had changed Harvey's life forever. In the picture Sidney looked healthy, tan, and a touch on the chubby side. When he died two years later, his skin was pasty white where it was not covered with purple lesions, and he weighed less than eighty pounds.

Harvey shook his head. All gone.

He leaned forward and picked up the photograph of his ex-wife. He knew he had been as much to blame (more) for the failed marriage as she was. Twenty-six years. Twenty-six years of marriage, of shared and shattered dreams, rushed through his mind. For what? What had happened? When had Harvey let his personal life crumble into dust? His fingertips gently passed over her image. Could he really blame Jennifer for getting fed up with the clinic, for not wanting to sacrifice herself to a cause?

In truth, he did.

'It's not healthy, Harvey. All that time working.'

'Jennifer, don't you understand what I'm trying to do here?'

'Of course I do, but it's gone beyond the point of obsession. You have to take a break.'

But he couldn't. He recognized that his dedication had gone off the deep end, yet his life seemed so minor when he considered what the clinic was trying to achieve. So

Jennifer left. She packed and moved to Los Angeles where she was living with her sister, Susan, Bruce Grey's ex-wife. Yes, Harvey and Bruce had been brothers-in-law as well as partners and close friends. He almost smiled, picturing the two sisters living together in California. Talk about fun conversations. He could just hear Jennifer and Susan arguing over which one had the lousier husband. Bruce would probably have gotten the nod, but now that he was dead the girls would raise him to sainthood.

The truth of the matter was that Harvey's entire world, for better or for worse, was right here. The clinic and AIDS. The Black Plague of the eighties and nineties. After watching his brother ravaged and stripped to brittle bone by AIDS, Harvey had dedicated his life to destroying the dreaded virus, to wiping it off the face of the earth. As Jennifer would tell anyone who would listen, Harvey's goal had become an all-consuming obsession, an obsession that frightened even Harvey at times. But he had come far in his quest. He and Bruce had finally seen real progress, real breakthroughs when . . .

There was a knock on his door.

Harvey swiveled his chair back around. 'Come in, Eric.'

Dr Eric Blake turned the knob. 'How did you know it was me?'

'You're the only one who ever knocks. Come on in. I was just talking to your old school chum.'

'Michael?'

Harvey nodded. Eric Blake had become a member of Harvey and Bruce's team two years ago when they realized that two doctors could no longer carry the patient load by themselves. Eric was a nice kid, Harvey thought, though he took life way too seriously. It was okay to be serious, especially when you dealt with AIDS patients all

day, but a person had to be just a little loose, just a little quirky, just a touch loony to survive the daily ordeal of death and suffering.

Eric even looked tightly wound. His most distinctive feature was his neat, scouring-pad, red hair. When you looked at him, the expression *clean-cut* came to mind. Polished shoes. Good dresser. Eric's tie was always pressed and tied properly, his face freshly shaven even after forty-eight hours on call.

Harvey, on the other hand, had his tie loosened to somewhere around his knees, believed in shaving only when the growth began to itch, and would need a handgun to shoot his hair into place.

Eric Blake had grown up on the same block as Michael in a New Jersey suburb. When Michael first became Harvey's hospital patient, little redheaded Eric Blake visited him every day, staying as long as the hospital would allow. Back in those days Harvey was an overworked intern, but he liked to spend any free moments he could muster in the hospital with Michael. Even Jennifer, a hospital volunteer then, found herself drawn to the child. Very quickly Harvey and Jennifer formed a special rapport with this irresistible young boy caught up in a world of constant abuse.

Over the years Harvey and Jennifer watched Michael grow from childhood through adolescence and into manhood. They went to his basketball games and music recitals and award dinners, applauding his achievement like proud parents. They were there to comfort him after his beatings, after his mother's suicide, after his abandonment by his stepfather. Looking back on it now, Harvey wondered if their close relationship with Michael magnified their own major marital problem: No children.

Maybe so. They tried, but Jennifer could never carry to full term. Perhaps if she had, things might have been different.

Doubtful. Very, very doubtful.

Harvey wondered if Jennifer still kept in touch with Michael. He suspected she did.

‘Did you tell Michael—’ Eric started to ask.

Harvey interrupted him with a shake of his head. ‘Not yet. I just wanted to make sure Sara was going to be at the party tonight.’

‘Is she?’

‘Yes.’

‘What are you going to tell her?’

Harvey shrugged. ‘I don’t know yet.’

‘It doesn’t make any sense. Why when we’re so close—’

‘We’re not that close.’

‘Not that close?’ Eric repeated. ‘Harvey, look out there. People are alive because of you.’

‘Because of this clinic,’ Harvey corrected.

‘Whatever. When we let the results go public, we’re going to go down in medical history next to Jonas Salk.’

‘I’m more worried about the present.’

‘But we need the publicity so that we can raise enough money to continue—’

‘Enough,’ Harvey broke in, glancing at his watch. ‘Let’s make a quick check of the charts and head over to the lounge.’ He smiled tiredly. ‘I want to watch Sara’s report on Reverend Sanders.’

‘No friend of the cause, that one.’

‘No,’ Harvey agreed. ‘No friend.’

Eric picked up a photograph from the credenza. ‘Poor Bruce.’

Harvey nodded but said nothing.

‘I hope his death means something,’ Eric said. ‘I hope Bruce didn’t die for nothing.’

Harvey moved toward the door, his head lowered. ‘So do I, Eric.’

George Camron removed his gray, pinstriped Armani suit, carefully folded the pants at the creases, and placed it on a wooden hanger. He had been forced to burn another Armani two weeks ago, and that upset him very much. Such a waste. He would have to be more careful with his wardrobe. Blood-stained silk suits raised overheads and increased expenses.

George, a very large man, enjoyed the finer things in life. He wore only custom-made suits. He stayed in only the most luxurious hotels. He frequented only the finest gourmet restaurants. His slicked-back hair was styled (not cut, styled) by the world’s most expensive hair designers (not beauticians, designers). He enjoyed manicures and pedicures.

He walked over to the hotel phone, picked up the receiver, and pressed seven.

‘Room service,’ a voice said. ‘Is there something we can get you, Mr Thompson?’

The Ritz always referred to its guests by their names when they called. The personal touch of a very fine hotel. George liked it. Thompson was, of course, his current alias. ‘Caviar, please. Iranian, not Russian.’

‘Yes, Mr Thompson.’

‘And a bottle of Bollinger. 1979. Very cold.’

‘Yes, Mr Thompson.’

George hung up the phone and relaxed on the king-sized bed. He was a long way from his humble beginnings in Wyoming, a long way from his military days in Vietnam, a

long way from Thailand, the country he now called home. A wide variety of elegant hotel rooms was George's home now. The Somerset Maugham suite at the Oriental in Bangkok. The harbor penthouse at the Peninsula in Hong Kong. The corner suite at the Crillon in Paris. The presidential suite at the Hassler in Rome.

George checked his watch, turned on the television with the remote control, and switched to Channel 2. In a few minutes *NewsFlash*, with Donald Parker and Sara Lowell, would be on. George wanted to watch that show very much.

The phone rang. George picked it up. 'Hello.'

'This is . . .'

'I know who it is,' George interrupted.

'Did you get the last payment?'

'Yes.'

'Good,' the voice replied.

The voice sounded nervous. George was not sure he liked that. Nervous people had a tendency to make mistakes. 'Is there something else I can do for you?' he inquired.

'As a matter of fact . . .'

Another job. Excellent. George had no idea who his employer was, nor did he care. He did not even know if the voice on the other end of the phone was calling the shots or merely a go-between. It did not matter. This was a job where you asked no questions. George did his work, collected his pay, and moved on. Questions were irrelevant.

'I'm listening,' he said.

'The last job I gave you . . . it went smoothly? There were no problems?'

'You read the papers. What do you think?'

'Yes, well, I just wanted to make sure. You have Dr Grey's files?'

‘Right here,’ George said. ‘When do you want to arrange a pickup?’

‘Soon. Have you been wearing the gloves and a mask like I told you?’

‘Yes.’

‘And nothing else happened?’

George wondered for a moment if he should tell his employer about the package Bruce Grey had mailed at the airport. But no, it was none of George’s concern. He had been hired to kill the man; make it look like a suicide; grab any files or papers he had on him; cut a page out his passport; and leave all money, personal effects, and identification untouched. Period. Nothing about mailed packages.

Except of course, it *was* his concern. He should never have let Grey mail that package. It was a mistake, George was sure of it, but there had been no way to stop him. He shook his head. Maybe he should have done some more background checking before he signed on for this job. Something about it was not right.

‘Nothing else,’ George said.

‘You sure?’

George cleared his throat. Dr Bruce Grey had made the job painfully easy. His checking into a high-rise hotel had been a blessing for George; it gave him the license to use whatever means he wished to elicit pain and solicit the suicide note. Any physical trauma inflicted on Dr Grey would be hidden in the splattered mess on the pavement.

‘I’m sure,’ George said. ‘And in the future, don’t make me repeat myself. It’s a waste of time.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You said something about another job?’

‘Yes,’ the voice said. ‘I want you to eliminate another . . . person.’

'I'm listening.'

'Is someone else with you?'

'No.'

'I hear voices.'

'It's the television,' George explained. '*NewsFlash* is about to go on. Sara Lowell's debut.'

The voice on the phone sounded startled. 'Why . . . why did you say that?'

A strange reaction, George thought. 'You asked about the voices,' he replied.

'Oh, right.' The voice tried to steady itself, but the strain was unmistakable. 'I want you to eliminate someone else.'

'When?'

'Tonight.'

'This is very short notice. It will cost you.'

'Don't worry about that.'

'Fine,' George said. 'Where?'

'At Dr John Lowell's house. He's having a large charity formal tonight.'

George almost laughed out loud. His eyes swerved back toward the television. Dr Lowell. Former surgeon general. Sara Lowell's father. That explained the bizarre reaction. He wondered if Sara would be at the party.

'The same method as the first two?' George asked.

'Yes.'

George took his stiletto out of his pocket, snapped it open, and examined the long, sleek blade. It would be messy, no question about that. He considered his wardrobe and settled on the green Ralph Lauren polo shirt he had picked up in Chicago. It was a little too tight around the shoulders anyway.