

Part I

Chapter 1

When Annie d’Inard looked back upon that day, she realized that she had been delivered an omen.

It was going to be another one of those meetings, with a smug client encouraged into obnoxiousness by her ass-kissing colleagues. They had asked for her, they had sought her creative talent for their ad campaign, but that wouldn’t stop them.

She knew how the meeting would go. They would sit relatively quietly as she delivered her presentation, twirling Montblanc pens, adjusting a French cuff here or there, crossing and uncrossing legs. When she concluded, one of them—probably the one with the slicked-back coiffure—would clear his throat and close the folder. Then, in a voice as greased-up as his hair and with a smile so patronizing she’d want to puke, he would pound her ideas to the ground. When he’d knocked her around enough to get his rocks off, he’d propose his own ingenious concept and ask Annie what she thought of it. Instead of telling slick-head to go fuck himself, she’d be obliged to respond that she would give it due consideration.

She so dreaded the upcoming hour that she contemplated pleading illness, though she knew that would merely postpone the inevitable. Craving a distraction, she picked up a newspaper someone had left on the conference table. Fastest-growing segment of the HIV-infected population, she read—heterosexual women. She felt an overwhelming nausea for a few seconds. Then she put the article down, preferring to think about the meeting.

At the end of the day, when Annie drove to meet her lover, that sick feeling returned. It wasn't unusual for her to feel that way; their encounters never left her with any sense of satisfaction. She would often wonder after she left, why she had gone there, and ask herself what she had gotten from it. She'd sometimes drive aimlessly for hours afterward, her mind turned off, her body feeling heavy, burdened. Now and again she'd even resolve to stop seeing him. But inevitably, and usually in the lonely night as she waited for her perennially late husband to return home, the need would resurface. It would drive her to pick up the telephone and make that call, the one in which she asked timidly, "When can I see you?" Before long she would find herself with him again, like an animal that cannot stop itself from biting at a wound, though it merely overlays one pain with another.

The carefully placed photos of Glenn Winters's wife and children greeted her, grinned at her, as she entered his office. He was on the telephone and raised a single finger to indicate that he'd be a minute. She lifted a corner of her mouth in an almost-smile, then went to the bar to pour a drink. By the time he concluded his conversation, she had guzzled the Jack Daniels and was stretched across the leather couch. He grinned seductively as he approached her, leaving his tie, shirt, and slacks strewn behind him.

They had to hurry on this Friday evening, because Annie was to meet her husband at a reception for one of his law partners. The lovers wasted no time in putting their naked bodies together and little on foreplay. It was that moment of penetration that she longed for anyway, the instant of connection, when something deep inside turned on and obliterated everything else. It was then that she felt the hope—however fleeting—the hope that it could happen again, that she might know the depths of a man and the rapturous embrace of kindred souls.

But everything stopped the day the letter came.

It was after midnight when Annie and her husband headed home from Philadelphia. A powdery snow had begun to fall, and the wind organized it into pinwheels that spun furi-

ously in their headlights before being scattered asunder by the speeding Mercedes. Mike seemed deep in thought and kept his eyes fixed on the road as he drove. Annie leaned her head back and closed her eyes from time to time.

When they walked into the kitchen of their old farmhouse, the floorboards creaked beneath their feet. The aromas of wood smoke and the day's cooking lingered; Marc's overburdened backpack and an open schoolbook lay on the table where he'd left them. Lucy, their housekeeper, had placed the mail on the pine sideboard, and Mike went to it first thing. On the top of the pile was a postal notice of attempted delivery; as he shuffled through the envelopes, it got moved to the bottom.

Annie went to her son's room before turning in. His face, so sweet in repose, drew her to kiss it softly. Still asleep, he brushed at the spot, then turned away from her. His dog, an obese beagle named Buddy, lay curled on the covers. He lifted his head and enthusiastically wagged his tail in anticipation of his own kiss. She delivered one to his head, whispering, "You're such a spoiled baby," then scratched under his chin. His tail continued to beat against the mattress as he watched her close the door.

Eager for the warmth of their bed, she wasted no time in donning her nightgown and taking refuge under the piles of covers. Mike, however, removed his clothing methodically in what seemed to be slow motion. She watched as he gradually revealed his body in the dim light, his back taut and strong, his legs all muscle.

He'd barely spoken to her since leaving the reception, so when he asked, "How was your day?" it seemed forced and unnatural.

She watched him smooth the creases of his trousers, then carefully clamp them in the suit hanger. "A pain in my ass," she answered, "that's how it was."

He had gone into the bathroom and called back to her now, "You seem to have a lot of those lately."

She sighed in exasperation and waited for him to return. "You know, it was the most fateful day of my career, the day that *Ad Week* decided to spotlight my work. Now

every asshole-run corporation out there wants me do their campaign, and it's goddamn painful dealing with them, because Rich just doesn't get it. Just because a client has an ad budget large enough to end starvation in the third world, that doesn't mean we should do whatever asinine thing they ask—we need to maintain some standards.”

He pulled his jogging clothes from the dresser and laid them on an upholstered bench—as was his habit—so he could slip into them in the morning without awakening her. “Why don't you leave then, strike out on your own?” he proposed. “Then you could do things your way.”

“Are you kidding me?” she frowned. “You know how I am; I'd alienate more clients than I'd win. The good thing about Rich—there's nobody better at sucking up. He wrote the book.”

Knowing Rich as he did, Mike might have chuckled at her comment, but his mind was too burdened for laughter.

Her tone softened. “Besides,” she continued, “I don't want to work that hard. There are other things I'd like to do with my life, like spend time with my husband.”

When he turned to face her, he smiled vacantly. Annie pushed the covers aside with a warm, inviting smile. He dropped his eyes to the floor and climbed in beside her, settling on his back, his arms folded behind his head.

She propped herself on an elbow and rubbed his chest with one hand. “Too tired?” she questioned softly.

“Too distracted,” he answered.

“Want to talk about it?”

He shook his head no.

She rolled to her back, and they both lay staring at the ceiling. The wind whistled through the frail windows, and the radiators clicked softly. Every so often, a slight gust actually blew through the room.

“This is the only time of year I ever think about moving to a new, insulated house,” he told her.

“We could get new windows,” she responded, “if we had the heart to do that to the place.” As ineffectual as they were, they were mostly the original leaded glass of

the two hundred-year-old structure. "Shall I get up and light the fire?"

"Don't bother." He turned and pulled her close. "We'll be warm in a few minutes."

She kissed his forehead. "That was a nice party the firm gave Rod, but I can't see him retired. He's as much a workaholic as you are."

"He's not exactly retiring," he explained. "He'll be of consul and probably at the firm as much as ever, at least in the beginning."

"Then why bother?"

"It gives him more freedom. He can travel with Val and be gone for weeks if he's a mind to."

She stroked her husband's graying hair. "Would you consider doing that? Would you retire early?"

He exhaled in a short burst and appeared to be contemplating the idea.

Seeing that, her face lit and the green in her eyes seemed to deepen. "Think about the things we could do! I saw an ad the other day for a villa in the Tuscan hills, complete with staff. We could rent it for the summer—God, wouldn't that be wonderful? You and me and Marc, we could even take Lucy if she'd go! Think of how marvelous it would be to wake up every morning with nothing to do except whatever brought us pleasure."

He cut her off. "I'm not ready for that. Besides, it would be professional suicide," he answered. "I'm forty-five years old, Annie. I'm at the peak of my career."

She leaned over him and looked into his eyes, eyes that were speckled and softly colored, like a fawn. "You work too hard, sweetheart. We hardly see each other anymore."

Mike looked away. It was always difficult to withstand the intensity of her gaze. "It's the only way I can keep up. You know what my caseload is like. The conference table in my office is stacked two feet high with depositions."

"But you can change that if you want to," she persisted. "It's not like we need the money."

"It's not the money."

Her voice became softer. "Then what is it, honey? Life is too short. The way we're going about it, I worry that one of these days we're going to wake up and realize we're out of time."

Rather abruptly, he turned his back on his wife.

Annie felt that all-too-familiar sensation shoot through her now, like something cold tearing into her chest. "Please, Mike," she pleaded.

His voice was slightly strained. "Why do you always do that? Why do you push and push, trying to get me to talk about things you know I don't want to discuss?"

"I'm sorry," she said, as she kissed the back of his neck. "Please don't be mad. We need to talk. As time goes by it seems we do that less and less."

"I'm not mad, I just don't want to talk," he insisted. "It's late and I'm very tired."

"It's more than that, I can feel it." The stinging emptiness in her chest grew as her husband pulled away and locked himself up. But a sudden realization about the time of year and the memories it evoked for Mike broke through her distress. She whispered to him now, "I'm sorry, I forgot."

"I haven't," he murmured.

She reached her arms around him, but he remained stiff and unyielding.

Toward dawn, Mike awakened. He lay on his back, looking around the room, listening as the wind rippled the tin roof over their heads. He listened also to the sound of his wife's breathing. Her breaths came slowly, deeply, and in them he heard the venting of the anguish he'd caused her. He understood that pain. He hated that he always seemed to bring it to her, but he could never help himself. Cautiously, he reached to stroke her dark hair, then he brought his face close to take in the scent of it. He heard her moan slightly and he waited, knowing that she was awakening.

She turned to him and opened her eyes. "Having trouble sleeping, honey?" she asked in a husky, nighttime voice.

"The wind woke me." He went back to stroking her hair.

“I love that sound,” she responded. “I always have. Wind like that reminds me of Scotland.”

He smiled slightly. “It’s a wonder you’ve never gone back after all these years.”

“It’s a damn shame, that’s what it is. But before I met you, I didn’t have the time or the money, and since we’ve been married, well, I haven’t wanted to go without you.”

He reached for one of her hands. “You could take Marc. I know he’d love to see the places he’s always heard his mother speak of.”

“It’d be better with all of us. That’s the way I’d like to go back.” She smiled so sweetly it drew him to kiss her lips. “That was nice,” she said, as he took his mouth away.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” he sighed. “It’s just so damned hard. Sometimes the memories are so fresh, it seems like yesterday.”

“It’s all right, sweetheart, I understand,” she answered, just as she always did, trying to make it easier for him.

He took her in an embrace and pressed his erection between her legs.

He passed into sleep as he held her in his arms, but Annie’s heart and conscience kept her eyes from closing. Her soul was scorched by the agonizing realization that only hours earlier she had betrayed her husband once again and allowed another man entrance to that private part of herself. But even as she experienced that gnawing, burning pain, her flesh grew colder, until she felt as frigid and unprotected as one of the bare trees outside their window that quietly endured this winter night. For their coming together had happened as it always did—as she was beginning to believe it always would—with his heart locked safely away from hers and hers left untouched, futilely beating on its own.

When her husband turned away and onto his stomach, falling deeper into his slumber, the action reminded her of something from her past. As she finally began to sleep, that memory ignited a dream. It was one she’d had

on and off throughout the years, and she always awakened from it feeling anxious and disturbed—sick inside.

She was standing outside the enormous iron gates of a cemetery, watching a white-haired man as he tended to the graves, each of which were carefully planted like tiny, perfect gardens. From time to time he looked up and smiled at her. She clung to the gates with clenched fists and pleaded with him to open them, to allow her entrance to that special, beautiful place, but he would not.

Then she was in the gloom of a dark woods, outstretched upon leaves, juices trickling from her vagina. She wanted to sit up, but when she tried to move her hands seemed shackled to the ground, her body encumbered by an enormous weight. Something cold grasped her leg and drew it away from the other, separating her tender labia. She felt the cold creep up one thigh, wrapping itself around and around like a snake, until it reached the moisture it sought and slid into it, wriggling its large, hooded head against her insides—before it finally halted and slithered out.

* * *

Before anyone else was up, Mike ate a toasted bagel, washing it down with a glass of grapefruit juice, then plunged into the cold darkness to begin his run. The snowfall had ended and the plow had already cleared the narrow country road, so it was easy going. He spied a herd of deer making a feast of the rhododendron that lined his neighbor's drive, their graceful forms visible in the growing, pearl light. They paused long enough to look up and follow his movements as he jogged past, and he slowed so that he might enjoy the moment with them. As long as he had lived in this countryside near the Delaware River, and it was more than nine years now, he never ceased to be taken with scenes like these. Although moving here meant a long, often difficult commute from his office, he had never regretted it. It was the kind of home Annie had always dreamed of having, and in his love for her and her

son, he had adopted it as his dream, too. He picked up speed after he passed the deer to tackle the hill that came before the river.

Annie sat at the table with her thirteen-year-old son while Lucy prepared his breakfast. She had lit a fire in the walk-in fireplace that was the focal point of the kitchen, and it roared and crackled, brightening the large room.

“Did you remember I have basketball practice this morning, Mom?”

“I did. How’s it going? Don’t you have a big game this Friday?”

“Yup. Are you and Mike coming?”

“Lucy and I are planning on it, but we’ll have to wait and see about Mike.”

Lucy placed his plate of scrambled eggs and toast in front of Marc, and he looked at his watch. “Never mind that,” she grumbled, “you’ve got time to eat. You can’t play on an empty stomach.”

“Coach makes you run laps if you’re late,” he complained before diving into his food.

“Take your time,” his mother told him. “I’ll get your jacket and warm up the car.”

“Annie, wait,” Lucy called to her. She went to the sideboard and shuffled through the prior day’s mail, looking for the yellow slip of paper. “When I went for the mail yesterday Joyce gave me this. She wouldn’t let me sign for it. She said you had to.”

Annie took it from her and tucked it into her pocket.

“Morning, Joyce,” Annie greeted the postmistress.

“Mornin’. How’s everything?” Knowing what Annie had stopped in for, Joyce had already turned to one of the sorting tables. She passed it over the counter with their other mail and a simple, “Here you go.”

Annie stared at the envelope, and her heart immediately picked up speed. Joyce held out a pen and Annie took

it with a trembling hand. The signature she left was illegible, and she forgot to say good-bye.

As she read the words, the air in her lungs was suddenly, forcefully expelled, as though she'd been punched. When her hands began to shake, she laid the letter on the passenger seat, then sat a moment grasping the steering wheel, trying to steady herself enough to drive. It was less than ten minutes before she was home, but the drive seemed interminable.

Mike had returned from his run and was drinking coffee by the kitchen fire while the dog slept near the hearth. He sat in one of the wing back chairs with his feet propped on a small stool, his thoughts drifting while he gazed into the flames.

Not unexpectedly, Michele came first to mind. He remembered the candlelit dinner she had prepared for him on the day she learned that she was pregnant. It had been a true expression of love, preparing his favorite foods when she'd been so nauseated and tired. Still, she had wanted to make the day as special as she could, one that he would always recall—the day he learned that he would become a father. She had accomplished that, undoubtedly, though she had never intended the remembrance to be so bittersweet, so persistently painful. He forced the recollection away, and in its place came the memory of last evening.

When Annie walked into the lobby of the Four Seasons to meet him, she had turned heads, as usual, with her strikingly pretty face and tall, shapely form. In the minute that he watched her cross the room and come to him—her dark hair prismatic in the lights, her hazel eyes lit with green—he felt it all: the pride, the love, the intense physical attraction, the joy of simply being near her. But by the time she reached him those feelings were overshadowed by his creeping guilt, his constant and unpredictable companion. It all too frequently ambushed him in moments like this, insisting that it was wrong for him to be this happy, telling him he had no right.

He looked up when Annie came into the kitchen and immediately discerned something in her face. “What’s the matter? Marc’s all right, isn’t he?” he questioned.

She halted near the table, then stood rigidly a few feet in front of him, afraid to take another step. “He’s fine,” she barely got out, “I dropped him off at basketball practice.”

He was uncomforted by her words and rose from his chair to search her terror-struck eyes. “What’s wrong? Something’s wrong.”

She handed over the letter from the Red Cross. “This came for me.” As his eyes scanned the document, she watched the color drain from his face.

He had to read it twice, because it didn’t sink in the first time. “My God,” he finally uttered, “my God.” His eyes remained fixed on the piece of paper in his hands. “It says you’ve tested positive in their screening for HIV, and that you should see a doctor immediately.” He lifted his eyes to hers now. “How can this be?” he asked, though the possibilities were already whirling through his head.

She took the letter from him, then sank into a chair. The glimmer of hope that she had grasped onto—the possibility that she had misinterpreted what she read—vanished, and she was suddenly dizzy and disoriented.

Mike had remained standing, seemingly unable to move. “It must be a mistake,” he forced himself to say, but it sounded more like a question.

In the last ten minutes her world had begun collapsing in on itself, at first in small, barely noticeable pieces, but now in larger and larger chunks, one after the other, with the thundering momentum of a rock slide. She glanced over the paper again, then read the words aloud to make certain she understood them. “The last two times you donated blood, you tested positive in our screening for HIV antibodies. But both times you were negative in the test for the virus itself. I don’t understand this. I don’t understand what this means.” Her heart was galloping, her breaths becoming increasingly shallow.

“Let me see it again.” Mike held his hand out and Annie gladly gave the thing over. He had to clear his throat first.

“The wording—it’s a warning. It sounds as though they think you’re in the early stages of the disease.”

The gray spots in her vision told her that she wasn’t getting enough oxygen. She looked around for her handbag and her husband understood. He quickly located her inhaler and watched as she used it, then waited a few moments while she tried to slow her breathing down.

He pulled a chair next to her, then sat and rested a hand on her thigh. “Better now?”

She nodded slightly.

He read the letter yet again. “But this can’t be,” he said, lifting his eyes to hers. “You’d have to have had a blood transfusion or—” As the next few words formed in his mind, he looked away and shook his head to dispel them. “We’ve been married nine and a half years.” His voice trailed off, but he focused on his wife again.

She met his eyes for a second, then she covered her face with her hands.

That action spoke volumes to him. But still he insisted, “Annie—Annie look at me—we’ve been married for more than nine years.”

She kept her face hidden.

“Either this is some God-awful mistake, or—” He couldn’t bring himself to accuse her, so he said, “I know I’ve been faithful.”

The palms of her hands were wet with tears and perspiration, and when she spoke into them, her voice was muffled and barely coherent. “I’m so sorry—so very, very sorry. I don’t know how to tell you.”

In anticipation of the blow to come, he stiffened and demanded, “Tell me what?”

She took several deep breaths before uncovering her face. “I haven’t been.”

“Haven’t been what?”

“Faithful.”

“Annie.”

“Please forgive me.”

Mike stood and let the letter fall to her lap, then took a few backward steps away from his wife, closing his eyes

tightly. After a long, painful moment, he looked at her again. "Who? Who is it?"

"Glenn Winters," she whispered.

The reality of a name, someone he knew existed but had never met, was like a fist in the gut, and it was in that second that he lost hope. "You told me you were just friends."

"We were."

"Do you sleep with all your friends?" he retorted.

It was hard enough to think, let alone explain something she didn't understand herself. "I didn't mean for it to happen. I only went to him to talk. I needed someone to talk to."

"I suppose talking to your husband was out of the question," he lashed back, with so much bitterness it curled his lip. He waited for her to respond. When she said nothing, he demanded to know, "And who else? Has there been anyone else?"

The mascara was washing down her cheeks, giving her a pathetic, crazed look. "No one else, just Glenn," she managed to answer.

"How long?"

"Two years—no three, maybe three."

He nodded as though he understood something, then closed his eyes as the pain overwhelmed him. They heard a noise behind them and were both startled to see Lucy descending the stairs that led from her apartment. When she was near the couple, she halted and stared gap-mouthed, like someone who had come upon an accident. "Has something happened to Marc?" she asked anxiously.

The shame she felt made Annie hide her face again.

"No," Mike told her. "Marc's fine." Then he asked, "Were you going to your son's this weekend?"

Although baffled as to why he would ask such a question, she nodded at him, for it was her custom to stay with her son and his family on her day off.

He put superhuman effort into restraining his anger. "I wonder, do you think you could stick around? I'd like you to pick up Marc and be here with him over the next few days. Do you think you could do that?"

Lucy spoke in an uncharacteristically quiet voice. "Sure," she said. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"I've got to go away for a few days," Mike answered. "Something unexpected has come up and I need to leave."

Annie looked up now, her tear-streaked face wild with fear. "You're leaving? You're going?"

He couldn't bring himself to respond to her. "I'll call you with a number, Lucy, where I can be reached." He stumbled into a chair as he made his way out of the kitchen and away from his faithless wife.

Annie's stunned eyes followed her husband until he was gone from the room. Then she turned to Lucy, the woman who had cared for her family these nine years like it was her own.

"Oh Lucy, oh God, what have I done?" she asked, and began to sob.

Lucy moved closer to Annie and patted her head. "Listen to me, you don't have time for that. Whatever's happened, you can't let him leave like this. Go after him, make him stay so you can talk this out. Get up," she pulled on one of Annie's arms. "Go on, get after him." Annie didn't move, so she plucked the letter from her lap. "Is it in here? Is what he's mad about in here?"

"It's the end result of what I've done, it's the hell I've brought on us both," she cried out.

"Whatever it is, it can't be the end of the world. Go after him and try to fix it. Go on." She yanked at Annie's arm again. "Hurry up now, before he leaves!"

Annie suppressed her sobs as she recovered the letter from Lucy and returned it to its envelope. Then she went to the sink and splashed icy water on her face before following her husband upstairs.

The bedroom was empty, so she went to his study and knocked softly.

He cried out, "Have the decency to leave me alone, will you?"

She opened the door anyway and found him sitting behind his desk, his face ravaged by tears. "Please, please let me talk to you," she pleaded. "You don't have to say anything, but I need to tell you why I did it."

“And that’s something I don’t need to hear,” he railed at her. “I can figure that out for myself, thank you.”

She took a few tentative steps closer to her husband. “I never stopped loving you, Mike. I never stopped.”

“Spare me,” he scoffed, “spare me the meaningless sentiment. Your actions have spoken loudly and clearly, and I don’t need to hear another fucking thing from you.”

She swallowed her pride and her desire to crawl away and die. “Please don’t leave me, Mike. I’m so scared. I’m frightened for you as well as for myself. If I’m infected, oh God, dear God! Please, at least stay long enough to go to the doctor with me. We’ll call Matt Bennett, we’ll go see him. We need to make certain you’re all right.”

He’d been looking out the window while she spoke, but he jerked his head around to glare at her. “Why in God’s name didn’t you use protection? Why in God’s name didn’t you have the sense to do that?”

Though she was putting everything she had into holding them back, a few more tears escaped, running straight down her cheeks and dropping onto her bosom. “I didn’t think it was necessary. I trusted him, Mike. We’ve been friends for so long. I thought I could trust him.” A mixed expression of hurt and shame overcame her, and it evoked pangs of sympathy in her husband.

He didn’t want her to do that to him, so he tried to dismiss her. “Fine,” he blurted out, “I’ll stay until you get medical help. Now will you go and leave me in peace?”

Annie sniveled and reached for a tissue from the box on his desk. “I’ve no right to ask you for anything, but I need you Mike. I need you more than I ever have—and if I’m sick, God—Marc! Please stay for Marc, he loves you so much. It’ll devastate him if you leave. If anyone should leave, it should be me; I’m the one who did this, I’m the one who caused all of this.”

He was trying to fight it, but simple compassion was quelling his anger. Besides, she was right in what she’d said about her son. He had to do what he could for Marc, protect him as much as possible. If his mother had contracted a fatal disease—God—he couldn’t even imagine how he’d

handle that. "All right, let's table the talk of leaving for now. The priority is the medical part of this. We need to get you to a doctor and get more information before we make decisions."

She broke in, "And you, you need to be tested."

"Fine." He took a few deep breaths before asking, "And what about him? What are you going to do about him?" He couldn't bring himself to say the man's name.

"I don't know. I can't think of that right now."

During the course of their conversation Annie's face had assumed a growing pallor. Mike frowned at her, wondering, "Have you eaten anything at all this morning?"

She shook her head slightly.

"Go lie down. I'll ask Lucy to bring you something."

"I'm not hungry," she murmured. Her hands trembled as she reached to discard the used tissue.

No, he reprimanded himself, don't let her do that to you. He stood, and in a commanding voice insisted, "Go and lie down, Annie. You've had a hell of a shock and you don't look well."

Slowly, she turned away. In her heart, she longed for him to follow, to reach a supportive arm around her waist and see her safely to bed. In her mind, she understood that he would stay where he was, standing securely behind his desk, his expression guarded, his eyes impregnable. She felt those eyes upon her as she left the study, felt them burn into her flesh. Her breathing became labored again, and by the time she reached their bedroom, it was all she could do to open the bathroom cabinet that held her inhaler and tranquilizers.

The doors between them had been left open so Mike could hear his wife struggling for air. He forced himself into his chair and grabbed hold of the desk's edge as a flood of emotion rushed over him, trying to sweep him away.

As the medication took hold, Annie fell back on their bed. She reached for the pillow that had only this morning cradled her husband's head, and pulled it to her chest, wishing that it was his body covering hers in an embrace, shielding her from the ravages of her pain. But the futil-

ity of her wish pierced her through, and she brought the pillow to her face to smother her cries with his scent.

With her breathing settling down, Mike was able to loosen his hold on the desk. The tide had passed and he had escaped this time, but he wondered about the next time, about the heartache and misery yet to come. He felt sick at the thought, and questioned his ability to handle it. To answer himself, he opened the small drawer that held his treasured photographs of Michele. With one look, the sobs were upon him, and he moved quickly to close his office door lest his grief be discovered.

Along the hallway that separated them, the chimes of the tall clock sounded, announcing the hour. When it concluded, husband and wife were stilled in their private anguish and blankly staring, both of them pondering the unknown future, that had embarked today from the irrecoverable past.