

UNTHINKABLE

Am I dreaming? He tried to open his eyes but the sunlight was too bright and painful. Perspiration trickled down his face, tasting salty in his mouth. He wanted to wipe the sweat off his face but he couldn't move his hands. The floor swayed under his feet, gently rocking back and forth.

Where am I? He strained to open his eyes again, squinting hard. The light wasn't as blinding as before, and in front of him a shimmering shape began to form drifting up and down. He continued focusing, gradually forcing his eyes wider. It was a woman, sitting across from him, silhouetted against a blue sky and blue water. He realized he was on a boat.

Who am I? He couldn't remember his name, where he was, or how he got on the boat. Someone was talking to him. "Good afternoon, Mr. Butler." He didn't recognize the voice but it was guttural and tinged with sarcasm. "Enjoying the cruise?" He tried to turn his head, to see who was speaking, but couldn't move. All he could do was sit, staring straight ahead at the woman. She was becoming clearer now, tan with blazing red hair, wearing a white T-shirt tied above a pink bikini bottom. He thought he knew her, but wasn't sure.

What is she holding? There was something shiny in her hands. He strained to make it out but the sweat kept pouring down his face, stinging his eyes and blurring his sight. Sunlight danced erratically off the object in her hands, like a mirror. No, it wasn't a mirror!

She's holding a gun! He was becoming aware of his surroundings; the hard flat bench he was sitting on; the boat railing pressing into the small of his back; the cry of seabirds; and something heavy in his lap. He couldn't look down, but felt his fingers wrapped around a smooth metallic handle, damp and oily in his palms.

What am I holding? In a flash of panic, he realized it was a gun in his hands. He struggled to get up, run, escape, but instead sat frozen, unable to will his lifeless limbs to move. The man was speaking again, to both of them. He was telling them to do something, something unthinkable!

What is she doing? He could see the woman across from him clearer now. She was raising her arms; holding the gun; trying to keep it steady against the shifting of the waves; pointing it at his chest. Inexplicably he felt his own arms lift as he brought his gun up to his eyes, taking aim at the woman. Everything was coming back now. He was beginning to remember it all, his old friend, the CIA, and the beautiful redhead facing him.

This is real! He squeezed the trigger.

CHAPTER ONE

Twenty-six days earlier

Friday, July 11, 1986

For most Americans there was nothing memorable about July 11, 1986: Ronald Reagan was president, the Berlin wall still stood, Mike Schmidt was leading the majors in home runs, and traffic was backed-up on Interstate 95 all the way from Washington to Baltimore. For Ryan Butler it was a day that would change his life forever.

Ryan fiddled with the radio in his new black Mercedes Benz 300E, a gift from his wife, Elaine. Alternating his foot between the accelerator and the brake, he kept pace with the intermittent lurching of the traffic. A Madonna song was playing on one radio station. On another there was a discussion of possible nuclear fallout from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, interrupted by reports of an overturned truck near the Baltimore Tunnel and warnings of severe afternoon thunderstorms. Above, a helicopter hovered like a giant dragonfly, barely visible through the summer smog.

Ryan pulled a map out of the glove compartment and unfolded it on his lap, searching for an alternative route home. It was late afternoon and it had already been a long and frustrating day. He had left Philadelphia before dawn to join his law firm's senior partner, Ned Heaton, for a meeting with one of their major clients in Washington. The nervous executives at the Ornone Chemical Corporation were in panic mode over a blizzard of environmental lawsuits. The meeting had gone badly for Ryan.

“Screw you Ned Heaton!” Ryan muttered to himself, alone in the Mercedes, stuck in a dense ribbon of traffic. He was still fuming about all the additional work that Ned had unexpectedly dumped on him at the meeting. It would be another long weekend in the office.

The clock on the dashboard read 4:55 p.m. He estimated he had traveled less than a mile in the past two hours. In the distance, he saw signs for an upcoming exit. Squeezing the Mercedes over to the shoulder, he made his way onto the exit ramp just as the first thunderclap shuddered through the air.

As best he could tell from the map, the exit would lead him to an unmarked road heading west that would eventually take him to Route 32. He would slice across the rural

farmlands of Maryland and Pennsylvania and then back to Philadelphia from the west side of the city. It would add miles to the trip and would take him out of his way, but that was better than sitting in traffic. Besides, there was nobody waiting for him at home. With Elaine gone on another weekend business trip, their condominium would be quiet and empty.

The thunderstorm hit with violent force as Ryan searched for road signs through the rain-soaked windshield. Coming to an intersection, he turned right looking for Route 32. As the thunder and lightning continued, he followed a two-lane road for about twenty minutes. The rain gradually stopped and the road narrowed, winding through rolling hills dotted with grazing cows. Low on the horizon, sunlight streamed through the clouds bathing the fields in a soft green glow. He turned off the air conditioning and opened the windows. The air was cool and fresh from the rain, smelling of earth and wet grass. Ryan relaxed his grip on the steering wheel and took a deep breath. It was good to be out of the city. Elaine loved downtown Philadelphia with its trendy restaurants, theaters, crowds, and activities, but he missed the quiet solitude of the country.

Ryan examined the map again but couldn't determine where he was. He knew he must have taken a wrong turn during the storm. In the distance, he could see the outline of a small town atop a hill. As he approached the town, a sign welcomed him: "Middleton, Maryland, Founded 1826, Population 12,285." The name of the town seemed vaguely familiar.

Large maple and oak trees lined the road into Middleton, partially obscuring stately old homes, many with wraparound porches, white wicker furniture, swings, and green striped awnings. At the center of town, the road circled around an ancient stone courthouse, guarded in front by two civil war cannons. A small cluster of shops stood on the far end of the circle. He spotted a drug store and parked in front, hoping to get directions. As he was getting out of the car, a sign on a storefront across the street caught his eye: "Shannon Insurance Agency, Steven Shannon Jr. Agent."

"Steve?" Ryan whispered to himself, slowly realizing why the name of the town was familiar. He walked over to the storefront and peered in the window. A large sign that read: "Closed for Business" hung on the door, but inside he could see a wall covered with framed photographs. Each of the pictures showed the same man smiling and shaking hands. Sure enough, it was Steve. Older, a little heavier, but still Steve. There were also several other framed pictures of Steve, much younger, in a baseball uniform, holding trophies.

Ryan hesitated. He had not seen Steve for nearly two decades, but their lives were forever connected. Now that he had stumbled into Steve's hometown, he couldn't leave without calling. He walked over to a phone booth by the drug store and lifted the tattered white pages that dangled

from a thin chain. He found the number for Steven A. Shannon, Jr., dropped a quarter into the slot, and dialed.

“Hello, Shannon residence,” a friendly female voice answered.

“Hello, may I speak with Steve Shannon, please?”

There was a long silence. “Steve's not here. May I ask who is calling?” The voice was different, stilted and formal now.

“My name's Ryan Butler. I'm an old friend of Steve's from way back—we played baseball together back in the sixties—in the minor leagues. I was just passing through town and remembered that Steve lived here so I thought I'd give him a call. Will he be in later?”

“Steve's in the hospital,” she answered curtly.

“It's nothing serious I hope.”

There was another long silence.

“Are you Steve's daughter?” he asked.

“No, I'm his wife,” she said, her voice guarded.

“Nancy?” He asked, remembering a pretty, dark-haired girl with brown eyes.

“No I'm Alana. Nancy's his ex-wife.”

“Oh,” Ryan said feeling stupid, “like I said, I haven't seen Steve in a long time. Is he able to have visitors?”

“No, he's in a coma.”

Ryan hesitated, unsure how to respond. “I'm so sorry to hear that. What happened?”

“It's a long story.”

More dead silence and Ryan wondered how he could gracefully end the call. The woman clearly didn't want to talk. “Listen Mrs. Shannon, I'm sorry if I upset you. I know that this must be a very difficult time for you. I wish there were something I could do to help. I hope Steve recovers soon. When he does, please tell him that Ryan Butler called. Let me leave you my home number...”

“Where are you calling from?”

“I'm at a phone booth in front of the Middleton drug store right in the center of town.”

“Please stay there!” There was urgency in her voice. “I'll be there in about ten minutes. Please don't leave!”

“Sure,” he responded bewildered.

“Ten minutes, don't go!” she repeated and abruptly hung up leaving Ryan standing dumfounded by the phone booth.

Ryan wondered what was going on with the woman. One minute she was reluctant to talk and the next she seemed desperate to meet him. Perhaps she didn't want to talk over the phone; maybe somebody was listening.

Propping his shoulder against the phone booth, he surveyed the town. Except for the drug store, all the businesses had closed for the weekend and the downtown streets were nearly deserted. An elderly couple walked by eying Ryan suspiciously. Ten minutes passed and nobody showed. A few cars and a pickup truck drove by but that was all.

While waiting, Ryan thought about Steve Shannon, remembering the summer of 1966; the small towns, the old dilapidated stadiums, the endless bus rides, and the occasional cheers from the crowds. He could see Steve walking up to him on the mound, grinning with his infectious boyish smile. "Slow it down big guy. Just get it over the plate. You don't have to strike out every batter."

Steve had been playing minor league baseball for a few years. He was a borderline catcher, good behind the plate but only a fair hitter with limited power. Still he had an outside chance of making the major leagues some day and that was enough to keep him in the game. Ryan, however, was on the fast track. He was the top pitching prospect for the Chicago White Sox with a ninety-eight mile per hour fastball and a \$30,000 signing bonus. It all had ended so suddenly for both of them.

Ryan checked his watch again. It was close to 6 p.m. and he still had several hours of driving ahead. He regretted making the call. Why stir up old painful memories. Another five minutes passed and Ryan decided that he wouldn't wait much longer.

In the distance, a police car approached, slowed down as it neared his parked Mercedes, and pulled in behind it. A tall, lanky police officer bounded out and immediately headed towards Ryan. With his sallow complexion, thin black mustache, and long narrow face, he reminded Ryan of a young Vincent Price. He stood a just a shade above Ryan's six foot two inch frame.

"Are you Mr. Butler?" The officer asked.

"How'd you know my name?"

He ignored the question. "I'm officer DeNardo with the Middleton police department. I'd like to ask you a few questions—why don't we walk over to the patrol car? This shouldn't take long." His voice was friendly but assertive. "I'll explain all of this in a little bit. It will be a lot easier for both of us if you cooperate."

"Cooperate about what?"

“Let’s just sit in the car now,” the officer said calmly, motioning towards the police vehicle. Ryan hesitated but then decided that there was no point in objecting until he knew what was going on. He sat in the car in the passenger seat. Next to him, Officer DeNardo turned down the police radio and angled his long body to look directly at Ryan.

“Tell me Mr. Butler, where were you on the afternoon of Tuesday, May 20, 1986?”

“Now wait just a minute!” Ryan said, his face reddening. “What the hell’s going on!”

CHAPTER TWO

Same Day

Officer DeNardo's questions continued:

"What's your name, age and where do you live?"

"My name is Ryan Butler, age forty two. I live at 421 Society Hill Towers in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania."

"What are you doing in Middleton?"

"I was stuck on traffic on Interstate 95 heading home to Philadelphia. I pulled off at an exit to take an alternative route back home. Somehow, I became lost and ended up in Middleton. When I saw the office with Steve Shannon's name on the door, I suddenly remembered that this was his hometown."

"How long have you known Steve Shannon?"

"Since 1966. We were teammates together in the minor leagues—in Indiana."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"It was August of 1966. I called him a couple of times after that but then we lost touch. Probably the last time we spoke was in early 1967."

"Why did you call Mrs. Shannon?"

"Like I said, it had been a long time since I had seen Steve, and since I found myself in town, I thought I should say hello—maybe stop by and see him. I didn't know he was in a coma."

"What do you know about Steve Shannon's finances?"

"What? Nothing at all."

DeNardo asked his final question, "Do you know why anybody would want to harm Steve Shannon?"

"Absolutely not! As I told you, I haven't seen the man for twenty years. Now can you tell me what this is all about?"

Officer DeNardo let out a deep breath as though an unpleasant ordeal was finally over. He shifted his long legs in a vain attempt to get comfortable. "Please let me see your identification."

Ryan handed him his driver's license and his business card that identified him as a senior attorney with Duke and Associates in Philadelphia.

“So you're a lawyer,” stated DeNardo looking impressed. “Sorry to put you through all this but we can't afford to take any chances. I'm not sure how much Mrs. Shannon told you about Steve's condition, but it's a very strange case. His prognosis looks really bad, him in a coma and all. People around here are very upset about the whole thing. Everyone liked and trusted Steve and a lot of people have been left holding the bag.”

Ryan had no idea what he was talking about. “What happened to him?” he asked.

Officer DeNardo shifted his legs again. “Well Steve ran the insurance agency here in town—took it over after his dad died. His customers included most of the local businesses. Most people insured with him just as they had with his father. He also handled the city and school insurance needs. No problems, everyone always got a fair shake from Steve. Then, about four weeks ago, he gets a call at his office. He tells his secretary to cancel all his appointments. Says he's going to meet an old friend who just called and happened to be passing through town—just like you called Mrs. Shannon. He leaves his office and tells his secretary that he'll be back a little later. But he doesn't come back to the office that day and never comes home that night. Doesn't show up the next day either. His wife, Alana, is frantic by then and calls the police. We put out a missing persons bulletin on him. Two days later, we get a call from the Baltimore Police Department. They found a man there who matches Steve's description—found him laying on a park bench down by the inner harbor—no wallet or identification on him but the cops notice him because he's wearing an expensive suit unlike the other vagrants in the area. They try to wake him but he doesn't budge. At first, they think he's just drunk but when he doesn't respond they take him to the hospital. After a while, they check with missing persons. They call my office and take Steve over to Baltimore General. The doctors there run a battery of tests but can't help him. They don't know what's wrong with him except that he appears to be in some kind of a coma.”

“Is he still in Baltimore?”

“No, I drove down to Baltimore with his wife, Alana, and we were able to positively identify him. He looked awful. Poor Alana, she was sobbing all over the place. Finally, the doctors say they can't do anything for him and they transfer him back here to the regional hospital, just outside of town. Since then he's just lying up there with all kinds of tubes hooked into him. It's sad to see him like that. He was such an energetic guy, always smiling and telling jokes. I guess I don't have to tell you that.”

“I still don't understand—what happened to him after he disappeared?”

“We don't know, except for one thing. This is where it gets very strange. Turns out that on the afternoon he disappeared he went into Baltimore and began withdrawing cash from his bank accounts. He wiped out his checking accounts, savings account, IRA's, money he was saving for his daughter's education. He also emptied all his business accounts and there was a lot of money in those accounts. He even got cash advances on his credit cards up to the limit. In all, he pulled out about \$250,000 in cash from about five banks.”

“What happened to the money?”

“Nobody knows—it's all gone. He didn't have a penny on him when they found him. He left his new wife, Alana, with no money at all and he's supposed to be sending his ex-wife child support—but she's not getting anything now. Also, a lot of people who paid their insurance premiums to Steve have been left dry. Steve kept a lot of the premium money in intermediate accounts and then he would transfer the money to the big insurance companies on a set schedule. All those accounts were wiped out including a very large payment for the school district. Now a lot of people, and the school district, have been left uninsured.”

“So when I showed up you thought that I might be the same person who called Steve that day?”

“Yep. We hoped you might be the guy, or knew something. You can imagine what Mrs. Shannon must have thought when you called and identified yourself as an old friend of Steve's. She called the police station immediately after she got off the phone with you. She was nervous as hell. You really shook her up—she's such a sweet girl too. It's really sad. They were newlyweds, only married for about three months. He met her at an insurance convention in the Bahamas last winter. Next thing you know they were married. People around here were shocked.”

Officer DeNardo lowered his voice to a hush, as if someone might be eavesdropping. “She's a lot younger than Steve, and very good looking too. You know folks around here didn't take too kindly to her at first—her being so young and the way Steve left his first wife. But she's a nice, classy lady and she's been through hell. I don't now how she's making ends meet now that all the money is gone. She lost a lot of her own money since they had joint accounts. Maybe her folks are helping her out. That reminds me; I promised I'd call her as soon as I finished checking you out. Please stay in the car and I'll give her a call from the phone booth.”

Officer DeNardo walked over to phone booth while Ryan sat in the car trying to sort it all out. He watched DeNardo on the phone. He was doing most of the talking, occasionally looking back towards Ryan. Finally, he left the phone dangling, walked back over to the car, and bent his

long body over to the window. “I told her that you check out. She'd like to meet you in person—to apologize. You being an old friend of Steve's. Is that okay?”

“Sure,” said Ryan, not at all sure that he wanted to get any more involved.

Officer DeNardo walked back to the phone and talked a few more moments, hung up, and came back to the car. “We're going to meet her over at the hospital—it's about ten minutes from here. It's a little hard to find so why don't I drive you over there. You can leave your car here and I'll bring you back.”

As the police car pulled out onto the street, Ryan started asking the questions. “Did anybody see this person who called Steve?”

“Nobody saw him with nobody,” answered DeNardo. “Those who remembered seeing him at the banks say he came in alone and left alone. The only thing we know about the caller is that he had a deep voice and told the secretary he was an old friend of Steve's. He didn't give his name. We've tried to come up with some kind of explanation. We speculated that maybe Steve set the whole thing up—planned to take the money and run—but somehow got mugged in Baltimore. But that doesn't make any sense knowing Steve. Or we thought maybe he had debts to pay off or something. Sometimes you just don't know about people. But again that just doesn't sound like Steve and there's no evidence that he was in any kind of trouble or owed anybody money.”

They were driving down a long single lane road heading south of town. The road was similar to the one Ryan had come in on but the land seemed slightly flatter and more open, with cornfields backing up to forests. The car shuddered over every little bump in the road and, after driving the Mercedes, Ryan wondered if the police car had any shock absorbers.

“Does anyone know how he ended up in a coma? Was he beaten or injured?” Ryan asked.

“Nope, there were absolutely no signs of any physical injury—no bruises or scars. The white coats also said there was no sign of any internal damage or trauma—no drugs or other foreign substances in his body either.”

“Do you have any other leads or clues?”

“Not until you showed up,” DeNardo laughed.

CHAPTER THREE

Same Day

As he drove with Officer DeNardo to the hospital, Ryan thoughts drifted back to the morning meeting in Washington. His boss, Ned Heaton, had been silky smooth as usual. Exuding confidence, he reminded the anxious Ornone Chemical Corporation executives of his law firm's impeccable record in fighting environmental-related lawsuits. He recited the firm's impressive list of big-name clients and once again congratulated them on their wisdom in hiring Duke and Associates to represent them. He even casually dropped the names of several U.S. Senators who were regular golf partners.

"As you know," Ned said, pausing for dramatic effect, "Duke and Associates has never lost a case in the environmental field." He neglected to mention that hundreds of cases were currently tied up in litigation, but still there had been no losses. In the process, Ned had built a reputation as one of the premier lawyers in the country for fending off environmental lawsuits and had made a fortune for himself and the firm.

Ryan said little during the meeting; knowing he was merely there for decoration, thrown in to show the importance of the Ornone account to the firm. As Ned breezed on, Ryan thought about all the work piling up for him back at the office.

Ned continued, "I understand your concern and I know that you are worried about the increasing number of lawsuits originating in the Bay Area. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. Instead of sending one of our junior attorneys, I'm going to send Mr. Butler here to San Francisco next week to take the school board deposition. We normally don't send our senior attorneys to take depositions, but this time we'll make an exception—to demonstrate how important the Ornone account is to our firm!"

Ryan looked up in protest, but Ned shot him a quick glance signifying that they would discuss the matter later. Ryan knew that this was classic grandstanding by Ned and a waste of his time and the firm's resources. Nevertheless, Ryan smiled and solemnly declared to all in the room that he would be pleased to go to San Francisco and represent the Ornone Corporation.

An hour later when they walked through the air-conditioned lobby into the hot and steamy Washington pavement, Ryan voiced his objection. "What was that about me going to San Francisco? You know I have to prepare for trial next week!"

“Sorry to spring that on you, Ryan, but I sensed their anxiety, thought we needed to reassure them—show them we were taking this case seriously—you know, bolster their confidence—demonstrate our highest level of commitment and, fortunately, you were there my boy.” Ned craned his neck searching for a taxi.

“But I can’t go, Ned. I need time to prepare.”

Ned stopped and turned quickly to face Ryan. He lifted a finger towards Ryan, not threatening but more like a teacher talking down to a pupil. “When a partner tells you to do something, you do it! This is a very important client for the firm. You *will* go to San Francisco next week. You’ll be on the plane for five hours each way; you can work on the trial then. Besides, you have two full weekends to prepare. I hate to say this, but if you had taken the Amtrak with me instead of insisting on driving yourself, you could have worked on the trial during the train ride.”

Ned sighed and put his hand on Ryan’s shoulder, “This is the final stretch Ryan, the governing board meets in two weeks. The partnership is within your grasp. Focus my boy—don’t let Elaine down.” With that, Ned turned and descended into a taxi, disappearing into the heavy Washington traffic.

Ryan resented Ned’s condescending tone. Ned treated him like his protégé although they were both nearly the same age. What made Ryan particularly mad was that he knew that Ned was right. He should have taken the train, but he hated the thought of spending an entire day with Ned. Ryan wondered why a man so smart and successful needed to talk so much about himself. He was sick of nodding politely as Ned went on and on describing his brilliant investments, his world-class art collection, his new yacht, his winning racehorse, his expansive wine cellar, and all the enthralling accomplishments of his over-achieving children. Most of all he was sick of being reminded of what a good friend he was to Elaine and how he was responsible for getting Ryan his position with the firm.

Ryan fidgeted in his seat as the police car turned into the hospital parking lot. He knew he didn’t have time for this. He was apprehensive about meeting Steve's new wife; he didn’t know whether Steve had told her about the accident and he wasn’t sure what he would say if she brought it up. He couldn't afford to be distracted, not now, not with the partnership meeting so close. He realized it had been a mistake to take the exit off the interstate.

CHAPTER FOUR

Same Day

Entering the hospital, Ryan immediately noticed the beautiful young woman in the corner looking out the window, about five foot seven, with brilliant blond hair, a slender figure, wearing a silk white blouse and tan skirt. She turned gracefully, waved at Officer DeNardo and approached them beaming, a lovely welcoming smile.

“You must be Ryan Butler,” she said offering her hand to him. “I really want to apologize. I guess Officer DeNardo explained what happened. When you called and said you were an old friend of Steve’s, I just didn’t know what to think—I was so scared. I called the police as soon as I hung up—I’m still shaking now.”

She held out her hands to show him. “I’m so sorry. Please forgive me. This last month has been a nightmare.”

Ryan was spellbound. Her blond hair was swept back in a ponytail and she was wearing only a hint of makeup. She didn’t need makeup. She was stunning, with a delicate face, a small finely chiseled nose and full lips. Her complexion was flawless and her skin radiated a bronze glow, but it was her emerald eyes that mesmerized Ryan. They were the greenest, most penetrating eyes he had ever seen. She must have been a model, he thought, but she showed no sign of a model’s haughtiness or conceit. She was exceptionally beautiful yet seemed totally natural and unaffected. Ryan felt flustered in her presence.

“Enough of this,” she said as if she were scolding herself, “let’s get to know each other. Tell me all about yourself and how you know Steve.” She gave Ryan a dazzling smile.

Officer DeNardo excused himself and Alana invited Ryan to sit down beside her on a waiting room couch. “Dr. Steinberg won’t be here for at least fifteen more minutes,” she said, and began asking questions: how long had he known Steve, what was he like as a young man, was he as funny then as he is now?

Ryan’s brain was functioning on two levels. On one level, he was carrying on a relatively coherent conversation, but on another level he was studying her every expression and nuance. He noticed the red polish of her nails as she brushed a wisp of hair from her face. He noticed how her breasts slightly tugged the fabric of her blouse when she leaned forward. He noticed how her skirt inched up slightly on her thighs as she adjusted her position. He noticed the hint of muscle in her

calf moving down to the curve of her ankle as she swayed her foot back and forth. Occasionally, he caught a wisp of her scent, soft and clean.

He told her some stories about Steve, when they played together for the Evansville White Sox minor league baseball team. She was especially delighted by the story about Steve's efforts to learn to play the guitar and how he was so bad they stopped the team bus and threw him off somewhere in the middle of Tennessee. "We drove ahead about five miles and then went back to look for him—but he was gone. We must have spent an hour going up and down that damn road trying to find him. Finally we gave up, headed for our next town— all of us quiet and worried. Wouldn't you know when we arrived at the hotel in Knoxville, there was Steve sitting in the lobby with a grin the size of Texas. The joke was on us. In those days people still picked up hitchhikers."

"I know Steve has no musical talent at all," she said laughing. "He can't even play the stereo."

All the while, he wondered if Steve had ever told her about the night of the accident. Probably not, he thought. If he had, she would know who he was.

She asked how long it had been since he had seen Steve and Ryan told her not since they played together for Evansville in 1966. "We spoke to each other a couple of times the following year when Steve went to graduate school in Wisconsin."

"Wow, I knew he went to school in Wisconsin, but I didn't know it was graduate school. I guess there's a lot I don't know about Steve. We were only married three months." She stopped quickly, realizing what she had just said. Her voice choked. "I didn't mean to say it like that—to talk like he's gone. I meant to say we've only *been* married three months."

Her eyes welled up and she searched for a tissue in her purse. "I'll be all right," she said regaining her composure. "Let's talk about you. What do you do?"

He told her that he was a lawyer and she gave him a look of mild surprise. He related a little about his legal career and was surprised by how proudly he spoke of his experience as a prosecutor for the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office and how fleetingly he spoke of his current position with Duke and Associates.

"Are you married?" she asked.

"Nineteen years now."

"Any kids?"

"No."

“OK, Mr. Lawyer,” she said with mock seriousness, “tell me did you or did you not ever make it to the big leagues?”

“No, I never did,” Ryan answered, now knowing that Steve had never told her about the night in 1966. “Now it’s my turn to ask you questions. How did you and Steve meet?”

Her eyes brightened, “I met him in the Bahamas. I had just started working for an underwriting company in Atlanta. I was doing conferences and conventions—you know, covering the display booths at the exhibition hall, answering questions and promoting the company. Actually, the Bahamas convention was only my second assignment. I was there for a national conference of independent insurance agents and so was Steve. It all happened so quickly.”

“Go on,” Ryan said curious as to why a beautiful young woman like Alana would be interested in a middle-aged insurance agent from a small town in Maryland.

“I don’t know,” she said wistfully, “there was just something about him that I found attractive. I had spoken to him in the exhibit hall about the company and had promised to send him some information. He seemed honestly interested and didn’t try to hit on me like most other men. Later that evening I saw him at the bar with a group of people and walked over to say hello. We talked for a long time and before I knew it the others had left and we were sitting together alone. After a while, I found myself telling him things about myself—things I had never told anyone before. He just had that way about him. I felt comfortable and safe with him.”

She smiled and put her hand on Ryan’s forearm.

“You know I’ve had some lousy luck with men in the past, mostly my own doing. I’ve made a lot of bad choices and done things I’m not proud of. Steve was a new kind of man to me, warm, funny, secure, and loving. Something I needed and still need in my life.”

Ryan wondered how long she would keep her hand on his arm. He could sense the faint rhythm of her pulse through her fingertips.

“The next time we saw each other was at the airport on our way home. I said hello and told him how much I enjoyed talking with him that night. He then asked me if I would consider going out with a man his age. He asked in a respectful and sincere way. I remember saying absolutely, on the condition that he never mention the age thing again. He flew down to Atlanta a couple of times after that and before I knew it he was asking me to marry him and I was saying yes.”

“It must have been a difficult transition moving from Atlanta to a small town like Middleton,” Ryan said.

“It’s been a little hard, everybody here knows everybody. At first, I thought they resented me because of my age, but I’m not as young as I look—I’m almost thirty. A lot of people here had been friends with Steve’s ex-wife, Nancy, and I think they thought that I had been the cause of the break-up. But honestly, I didn’t meet Steve until after they had been separated.”

Suddenly she moved her hand away to wave, “There’s Dr. Steinberg!”

Ryan interpreted that a signal to leave and he stood up, “Well I’d better be going. If there’s anything I can do…”

“You’re not leaving are you?” she asked. “I want you to meet Dr. Steinberg.”

“The doctor?” he answered puzzled. “Why?”

“So you can talk to Steve. I know he’d like to hear you.”

“I don’t understand,” Ryan said, sitting down again. “I thought Steve was in a coma.”

“He is, sort of—but not really. I don’t fully understand it myself but Dr. Steinberg can explain. That’s why I want you to talk with him.” She placed her hand back on his arm. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“No, I’d like to see him if you want me to.”

“Good!” she said turning to greet Dr. Steinberg.

Dr. Steinberg was short, bespectacled and pudgy with curly rings of brown hair. Ryan was surprised at how young he looked. He must be just a few years out of medical school, he thought. The doctor’s face was tired and stressed but lit up when he saw Alana. He walked right over to her and shook her hand. “Hello Mrs. Shannon,” he said warmly, smiling shyly like a smitten young boy. She introduced him to Ryan.

“I told Ryan that you could explain Steve’s condition and maybe, after that, he could talk to him,” she said.

Dr. Steinberg led them to a bright-lit examining room and they sat down in a circle of folding chairs. He adjusted his glasses and looked directly at Ryan. “This is a very strange and bewildering case, Mr. Butler. Steve appears to be in a coma. He does not respond to outside physical stimuli. If you prick him with a needle, there’s no reaction. He has to be fed intravenously and has no control over his bodily functions. In that regard, he reacts just like anyone else in a comatose state. Externally he appears unconscious, but I don’t think he is—neither does Alana.”

Alana nodded.

Dr. Steinberg moved forward in his chair to get closer to Ryan. He took off his glasses and began speaking again, in a whisper, as if confiding a secret. “All the tests we’ve run on his

brain functions check out normal. There is no sign of trauma or damage. We've run the full battery of tests, EEG's, CAT scans, MRI's, everything. We sent him back over to Baltimore General for more tests but they couldn't find any physical reason for his coma either. His brain waves as recorded on the EEG are normal. You can't distinguish his brain patterns from those of a normal person." Dr Steinberg shook his head. "People in comas aren't supposed to have normal brain patterns."

"There aren't any other cases like this," Alana offered.

Dr. Steinberg elaborated, "This appears to be a unique situation. I have searched the medical literature but there are no similar occurrences. There are cases in which people will drift in and out of consciousness but they all show some internal signs of brain dysfunction or neurological damage—and none of them has a normal EEG pattern. I don't know what to make of Steve's condition, nor do the doctors at Baltimore General. By all outward appearances he's unconscious, but by all internal tests he appears to be functioning normally. It's as if he is conscious but has lost control over all physical aspects of his body—like his mind has been severed from his body."

The doctor waited for a few moments for this to sink in. Ryan shifted uncomfortably in his chair imagining himself conscious but unable to move.

"Both Alana and I think he is fully aware of what's going on around him. We have him hooked up to an EEG, which monitors his brain waves. You can actually watch the wave patterns change when somebody talks to him. Exactly as they would if you were talking to a conscious person—just as I'm talking to you now Mr. Butler. Most of the time however, his wave patterns suggest sleep or deep thought."

Dr. Steinberg glanced at Alana and then back to Ryan. "I'd like to see how he reacts to your voice. If you're willing?"

"I already told Mrs. Shannon I'd be glad to talk with Steve if you think it might be helpful. Just tell me exactly what you want me to do."

"Just talk to him," Alana said. "Tell him some of the stories you told me, about when you played ball together. That's all. Maybe it'll cheer him up."

Her voice began to break as she fought to hold back her tears. "I know he can hear me. He's so close—he wants to communicate. I can feel it. Why would anybody do this to him?"

She started to cry and Dr. Steinberg sat down next to her, placing an arm on her shoulders. "It will be all right," he said handing her a tissue. "We're going to figure this out. We're going to get Steve back."

The rest of the evening was like a bizarre dream. Steve was lying on a bed in a bright white hospital room, hooked up to strange machines through a tangled web of tubes and cords. Mounted above the bed was an electronic monitor. Several green dots continually crossed the screen leaving ghostly pale waves. Dr. Steinberg explained that the monitor was hooked up to an EEG that recorded Steve's brain waves. The wave patterns changed as Dr. Steinberg and Alana talked. Ryan sat down by the bed, next to Steve's body, and related the same stories that he had earlier told to Alana. He avoided mentioning anything about the accident. The wave patterns shifted as Ryan spoke and soon Ryan found himself directly talking to the monitor, bypassing the shallow breathing body lying next to him on the hospital bed.

Ryan left the hospital around 10 p.m. He said goodbye to the Doctor and offered his assistance if there was anything he could do. He knew there wasn't. He shook hands with Dr. Steinberg and turned to say goodbye to Alana when she flung her arms around him and hugged him like a long lost friend. "Please stay in touch," she said.

On the drive home, he wondered what had happened to Steve. He wondered what had happened to the money. He wondered whether Steve could really hear him and, if so, whether he too was thinking of that awful night in 1966. He wondered what Elaine was doing and whom she was with. He even thought a little about work and the upcoming partnership meeting. But most of all he thought about Alana. He could still feel the imprint of her body pressed against his, hugging him goodbye, and he could still smell the lingering trace of her perfume on his shirt. She had evoked a conflicting combination of emotions: warmth, compassion, sympathy but most of all desire. He imagined holding her, kissing her, their bodies entwined, his mouth on hers. He tried hard to banish that image from his mind.

After midnight, he arrived back at his high-rise condominium in Society Hill, a fashionable and expensive Philadelphia neighborhood close to the Delaware River waterfront. He parked in the underground garage and took the elevator up to the lobby. The security guard recognized him, wished him a good night, and he took another elevator up to the twenty-second floor. The condominium was dark when he entered and he immediately turned on a light and checked the phone answering machine for messages but there were none. Elaine hadn't called.

Despite the hour, he wasn't tired. He opened a bottle of beer and walked out onto the balcony. The lights of the city spread out and faded in the distance. Below a steady flow of headlights meandered through the city streets. Quite a contrast from Middleton he thought. He wondered what so many people were doing up so late. He thought of all the couples out there, meeting, talking, and making love. He felt very alone.

He sat down on a chair and sipped his beer, trying to suppress a growing melancholy. Seeing Steve had stirred up all the painful memories, the ones he fought so hard to suppress, the shame, anger, and loss. How many nights had he lied awake, reliving the accident; wishing he could go back in time and change things; dreaming of the man he might have been? But that terrible night was cemented forever in his past, and nothing since had ever been the same.

He finished his beer, walked into the bedroom, and flopped onto the bed. He thought about Elaine, wondering what she was doing, but didn't really want to know. There was a coldness growing between them that neither wanted to acknowledge.

He turned off the lights without undressing and lay quiet, looking up to the ceiling in the dark, wondering if he would ever see Alana again.