

CHAPTER 1.

Warm-ups

To understand Jonathan Bailey and his obsession, we have to go back to Boston's old West End, a teeming neighborhood of Italians, Poles, Jews, Albanians, Lithuanians, African-Americans, and pretty much anyone else the rest of the city didn't want. They were as diverse a group of people as have ever been crammed into one tiny plot of land, with nary a white collar in the bunch. Tough as nails and loaded with strong opinions on everything from taxes to the Holy Ghost, but on this day it was a sure bet that everyone was in agreement on one thing: with Ted Williams, Bobby Doerr, Dom DiMaggio, and a host of other stars, the Red Sox were sure to beat the St. Louis Cardinals in the seventh and final game of the World Series.

"Dad, there's no sound!"

It was about six in the afternoon on October 15, 1946, and Theodore Bailey of 29 Joy Street had his head and hands inside an old, wooden console radio. The urgency in his son Alexander's voice was clear.

"Don't you think I know that?" came the agitated, muffled response from behind the speaker.

"But the game, dad, the game."

“Son, I’m trying as hard as I can to fix it,” Theodore said tenderly as he poked his head out from behind the console. “But I can’t make any promises.”

Alexander tried to mask his frustration, but what nine-year-old has that capacity? His father smiled sadly. Just about every week something else on the old radio needed repair, and more than anything, Theodore wished he could afford to buy a new set, but with rents going up and the cost of food, it seemed like every time they had enough money saved up... He looked at his son and said sincerely, “Look, if you want to go up to the Zipesi’s on the second floor or the O’Briens on the third and listen to the game there, I’ll understand. It isn’t every day the Red Sox are in the World Series.”

The younger Bailey looked tempted—just for a second. But then he looked at the tired face of his father and shook his head. “No, it wouldn’t be the same. We have to listen together.”

Theodore gazed back at the boy and wondered how he ever got so lucky. “Let me try one more thing. If it doesn’t work, we’ll both find some other place to listen to the game—together, okay?”

Young Alexander’s smile of encouragement was all Theodore needed. He nodded with determination to the boy before reinserting himself inside the console, and as he jiggled the wires and tapped on the tubes he began speaking. Alexander smiled as he listened to the sound of his father’s voice coming from the radio, just as if it were Dick Tracy or Fibber McGee speaking to him directly.

“You know, I remember the last time the Red Sox were in the World Series,” Alexander heard Dick Tracy say. “That was almost thirty years ago, in nineteen eighteen. ‘Course we didn’t have radio back then so you either went to the game—if you could afford it—or went down to Washington Street and stood outside one of the

newspaper offices and waited for them to post the score on a big blackboard. Ow, that smarts.”

“You okay, Dad?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. Just a little shock. But I think I might have found something,” the now hopeful voice from the console said. “Anyway, I remember my old man saying ‘we may not be able to afford a ticket to the game but we sure as hell can afford a ticket to stand in the street.’ So off we went with a couple of sandwiches your grandmother made and —” ZAP! “Enos Slaughter connects and drives the ball into right field and is on first with a single.”

“Dad! You did it!”

Theodore’s beaming face appeared from behind the console. “Just call me Marconi,” he said as he sat down next to his son, hiding a burn on his right thumb.

“So here we are in the bottom of the eighth inning in St. Louis,” Arch McDonald, the Red Sox announcer, seemed to be summing up just for their benefit. “The score is tied three-all and there are two outs with a man on first. Up next for St. Louis is Harry ‘The Hat’ Walker... Harry stands in the batter’s box now. There’s the pitch... and it’s a shot into centerfield!”

Little Alex jolted upright and grabbed his father’s hand—the one with the burnt thumb, of course. “The ball drops into centerfield and look at Slaughter go! Slaughter had taken a big lead from first and is already past second as Culberson finally gets the ball and is heaving it in to Johnny Pesky, the Red Sox shortstop. Slaughter is around third and he’s heading for home! Pesky has the ball, now and—”

There was this terrible moment of silence from the radio. Had it broken again? Alex squeezed even tighter onto his father’s hand (to the elder Bailey’s credit he barely

wincing) until they finally heard McDonald say “And now Pesky makes the throw to home! But it’s not in time as Slaughter slides across under the tag, and now the Cardinals lead the Red Sox by a score of four to three.”

Now Alex, his disappointment settling in, slowly released the vice-like grip on his father’s hand. “Don’t worry son,” the elder Bailey said through the intense throbbing of his damaged thumb, “we’ll get ‘em in the ninth inning.”

“But we didn’t,” thirty-year-old Alex Bailey was saying to his fiancée, Alice O’Brien, as they sat in the living room of his family’s home in Medford.

The Baileys had moved to this modest suburb just outside Boston ten years earlier, after the city forced them and twelve thousand others out of their West End homes to make way for high-rise apartment buildings. The story of the West Enders is still regarded as one of the great urban renewal tragedies of all time. Bad enough that these proud people had to endure the indignity of hearing their neighborhood described as a slum by politicians and developers. Worse yet was an implicit promise by the city that they would be given first crack at the new glass and steel apartments which would replace their wooden triple-deckers. Not only wasn’t that promise kept, but the rents of those fancy high-rise apartments were way beyond their reach, and in the resulting Diaspora the members of this close-knit community were scattered throughout the Boston area.

To complete the indignity, many of them had to pass the site of their old neighborhood on their way to work, where a giant sign read: If you lived here, you’d be

home now. "I did," many of them would say bitterly every day. It was a tough thing for many of these immigrants to swallow, some of whom had escaped dictators and pogroms and holocausts to come to the land of freedom and equal opportunity to find out that even in America, some people are more equal than others.

But life, as they say, goes on. The third-floor O'Briens and their girl Alice moved to Medford, just a block away from the first-floor Baileys and their boy Alex, who went from being friends, to sweethearts, to engaged lovers.

On this Thursday afternoon in October of 1967 the young couple and just about everyone else who could afford to skip work or school, was somewhere watching or listening to the Red Sox play the seventh and deciding game of that year's World Series. Even though his fiancée's family had a new color television and the Bailey's was only black and white, Alex convinced Alice to watch the game at their house so he could watch the game with his father. And so there Alex and Alice sat, crossed-legged on the floor between the couch and the Bailey's Zenith television set.

"If God-damned Pesky hadn't held the God-damned ball, we would have won that God-damned game," Alice heard the old man's voice croak from behind them.

"Theodore, please don't take the Lord's name like that," Theodore's wife, an older woman named Anna, said.

"I'll do whatever I God-damn well please in my own God-damn house," the old man growled as his wife crossed herself for the fifth time in the last thirty seconds.

Alice couldn't help from smiling. This was just like in her house a block away, except there, the accents were Irish instead of Polish.

The old man grunted at the woman sitting next to him and stared at the television set. "I got every reason to be angry. Look at this, it took 'em over twenty years to get

back to the Series. Would have been there in forty-eight, too, if McCarthy hadn't pitched Galehouse in that one game playoff against Cleveland, you know. Had two all-stars he could've used, but he goes with some jerk who won only eight games that year. Galehouse," he said as he fairly well spit the name. So what happens when we finally make it back to the series? The same God-damn thing. Against the same team, too. Same seven games. Same winner, too." He sighed.

"Well, they haven't lost yet, sir," Alice said hopefully.

Alex, who had been listening with one ear to his father and the other to the game, turned and saw his father pass the same benevolent smile to Alice that he had received so many years—and World Series—ago. Then he frowned. "Give 'em time," he said as he sank back into the couch next to his wife.

"Dad, there's not a single player on the nineteen sixty-seven Red Sox that was on any of those teams from the forties," Alex said. "Don't send them home just yet."

"Pesky's still coaching them, ain't he?" his father said with a wink.

"Well I think it's very exciting anyway just to be in the World Series," Alice said. "I mean they were practically in last place last year and for years before that."

"She's right," said Anna, who had grown very fond of Alice. Anna was pleased that her son had found a girl who, unlike so many youngsters today, respected her elders. "Why just to be in contention—" Anna started to say when Theodore interrupted.

"You hear that, boy? She thinks we should be happy just to be in the Series. I'm telling you, this is why girls shouldn't play sports." Theodore winked at Alex, whose smile disappeared quickly when he saw the disapproval in Alice's eyes.

"Well, as long as we don't forget it was all thanks to that nice Yazstremski boy," Anna said proudly and pleasantly, her Polish accent suddenly more prominent.

There was silence as Theodore mulled over his wife's statement. "He could use a haircut," Theodore finally said, after which the four of them settled in and watched the mighty Bob Gibson finish off their beloved team and win the World Series.

"Next year, pop, next year," Alexander said hopefully, as the St. Louis Cardinals swarmed the pitcher's mound and celebrated what seemed like a distant dream, a World's Championship...

"Dad, the grass is orange!"

Alexander Bailey looked to his left at his wife Alice, who seated next to him on the couch. "Don't look at me," she said. "You're the one who wanted a color TV."

Dragging himself off the couch Alexander slid down to floor and crouched next to his eight-year-old son, Jonathan in front of the family's new a seventeen-inch color television set he purchased just in time for the 1975 baseball playoffs, and began fiddling with the controls.

Since 1967, the Red Sox had fielded some pretty good teams that even contended a few times. But after the 1972 and 1974 seasons—two horrifying summers in which the Sox lost late-season leads, some began to suspect that their beloved team was somehow being prevented from winning it all by a higher power. Many fans began to lose faith, which was a shame because in 1975 the Sox swept the Oakland Athletics in the playoffs to advance to the World Series for the first time since 1967. This, of course, caused a mass conversion back to the fold and Alexander, who had remained faithful despite the past few year's worth of disappointments, wanted to pray in front of a color picture.

"There, how's that?" Alexander asked.

“Okay, I guess. The left field wall still looks a little brown,” the boy said.

“I can only hope the trauma doesn’t haunt you the rest of your life,” Alexander said sarcastically as he slid back onto the couch, where his wife Alice jabbed him in the ribs.

“I think the Sox are trauma enough for anyone” Alice offered. “What was it your father once said to me? Same seven games?”

“At least it’s not the St. Louis Cardinals again,” Alexander replied. “Can you imagine what my old man, God rest his soul, would have said about this?” he asked as he crossed himself and pointed to the television.

“So this time it’s the Cincinnati Reds. It doesn’t seem to matter, does it?”

“Hey, we’re only down by a run.”

“Yes, but we were leading by three until a few innings ago.”

From down on the floor, his head perilously close to the television screen, young Jonathan sought to console his parents. “Hey, we’ve still got last ups, remember? And Yazstremski is due up.”

Alexander smiled and gave Jonathan the Bailey legacy—that benevolent smile each father reserved for their son. “You’re right, Jon, we’ll get ‘em in the ninth.”

Later, Alexander would remember watching the tears well up in his son’s eyes when, at the end of nine innings, the Sox had failed to “get ‘em” and the Cincinnati Reds celebrated their 1975 World Series victory in Fenway Park. He would also recall that summer, three years later, when Boston was leading the New York Yankees by fourteen games and everyone in New England was saying “this is the year,” none louder or stronger than his now ten-year-old son, Jonathan, who looked up at his old man and said

with typical ten-year-old enthusiasm, “We’re going to win it all this year, for sure, right Dad?”

Of course, how can you tell a ten-year-old who idolizes Carlton Fisk about 1946 and Pesky held the ball or 1948 and Denny Galehouse, or 1949 and a twelve game lead or 1974 and an eight game lead, both of which disappeared like so many promises made but never kept? How do you tell a ten-year-old that? The answer is you don’t. The answer is you bite your tongue and remember that these were the lessons that you had to learn on your own and that it was easy for a beloved father to become disowned if he dared step between a boy and his idols.

So Alexander kept silent through July when the Red Sox began to falter. He maintained a positive attitude when the New York Yankees cut the lead in August. “They’ll pick up, dad, I know they will,” he heard his son say innumerable times that summer. But the lead dropped like an empty rocket booster over the ocean and then the Yankees, just four games back, swept a four-game September series with the Red Sox and tied them for first place. Some folks called it the Boston Massacre. What others called it was unprintable.

For Jonathan, it was like that great Yogi Berra line about it being “Déjà vu all over again” as he watched the Sox tumble into second place. For the benefit of his son, he kept his smile and an air of confidence, but deep down he had to admit that his own faith was faltering. Then, miraculously—amazing how many religious metaphors sports fans regularly use, isn’t it?—the Sox won all but two of their final thirteen games and wound up in a tie with the Yankees. That meant the regular season would be extended by one game. One game to decide the division championship. October 2, 1978.

Several innings after Bucky Dent’s home run cleared the left field wall and the

Yankees took the lead, Carl Yazstremski popped up to end the game and there was nothing Alexander could do but hold his sobbing ten-year-old son and tell him it's okay to care even if it didn't work out right this time because next year, for sure, the Sox would come back and win it all.

The noise being generated in the crowded bar was drowning out any hope Jonathan had of hearing the television. How could he have allowed his friends to talk him into sneaking into a bar to begin with, and on this night of all nights. The Red Sox were back in the World Series, for Christ sakes, could win it all with a victory, and here he was in a stupid bar. So big deal that it was the Cheers bar. His friends laughed when Jon scowled and said how it didn't look anything like it does on TV, because that is what every first-timer says after walking down the stairs along Beacon Street expecting to see Cliff and Norm but instead is greeted by a room full of total strangers. The only way everyone could know these tourists' names is by their luggage tags.

But, if he couldn't hear the television then at least he could see the game from where he stood. As he strained to see the picture he thought about his father, sitting at home watching the game with his mom. It seemed strange not to be there. But his dad had insisted. "Don't worry about us. We've got the new cable hook-up and the picture's clear as a bell. You go and have a good time. That's what college men are supposed to do" Jonathan wondered if he wasn't weird or something. Staying home with his parents watching the sixth game of the 1986 World Series was having a good time.

At least that's how he felt until he saw Mallory.

It was around the eighth inning, with the Red Sox leading three to two, when they

bumped into each other near the restrooms. Jon, who was learning the effects of beer on the human digestive system, was on his way to the men's room when he heard the roar of the crowd back in the bar. He turned to see what the commotion was about when liquid suddenly splattered across his chest.

“Oh, my goodness, I am so sorry!”

Jonathan looked down at his sweater and grimaced at the daiquiri stain spreading through his sweater like some horrible wound. How could someone be so clumsy, he thought angrily when he looked up at his assailant and froze. Two dark, green, eyes looked sympathetically back at him from the most beautiful face he had ever seen. Years later he swore he could remember every detail of how she looked, down to this one strand of hair that, despite all her efforts, kept falling stubbornly across her face. Years later she would smile recalling how it really was her eyes, and not her body, that he could not stop looking at.

She bought him a drink to apologize and they drank and talked as the game remained tied going into the tenth inning. Then he bought her a drink and they talked some more and it was only when the crowd began screaming that he realized the Red Sox had scored two runs in the top of the tenth and were just three outs from a World Series victory. Then two outs. Then one. Now just two strikes. Now only one strike away from what had eluded Boston and Theodore and Alexander and Jonathan since 1918. But all Jon wanted to do was to keep talking to this girl, which he did even as the Mets came alive and tied the game with Ray Knight on second and Mookie Wilson coming to the plate.

By then Jonathan and Mallory were walking along the Charles River on the Esplanade, stopping occasionally to stare into each other's eyes and kiss.

“And that’s why I never saw the ball go through Buckner’s legs,” Jonathan Bailey was telling his friends as they settled in on a beautiful Indian summer afternoon in October, 1999, to watch the Red Sox play the New York Yankees for the championship of the American League.

“So Jon, you think this is the year?” one of his friends asked Jonathan.

“Could be, Kenny. Could be,” he replied, smiling that special Bailey smile.

CHAPTER 2.

Anthem

The dream always started exactly the same way, with the growl of the umpire standing behind him yelling, “Strike two!”

Jonathan Bailey shook his head in disgust, then dug his right foot into the hard clay of the batter’s box. As he waiting for the pitcher’s next offering his eyes swept across the infield at his teammates currently occupying all the bases. There was Nomar dancing near first base, trying to disrupt the pitcher’s rhythm. Everett, always taking chances, was practically half way between second base and third. Meanwhile, the ever-cautious Guterrez stayed close to third waiting for Jonathan’s next swing.

It had been a long, hard-fought game coming at the end of a brutal weekend series with the New York Yankees. Tied for first place before the series began, each team had won a game, meaning that the winner would escape with sole possession of first place, along with some bragging rights.

At the plate, Jonathan resisted the urge to wipe away a bead of sweat that was forming on his forehead. The last thing he wanted was for the pitcher know he could be distracted by such a small annoyance. *Let him see me concentrating only on the game. Don’t show any sign of weakness*, Jonathan thought as he gripped his bat.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the pitcher planted his back foot on the rubber and began his wind-up. Jonathan watched him rear back and swing his arm over his body, accelerating the ball to a speed of almost 100 miles an hour on a trajectory towards the plate. Jonathan knew that in the six-tenths of a second the ball would reach the plate, leaving little time to analyze where it would wind up.

Jonathan flinched ever so slightly when the pitcher released the ball, and that annoying bead of sweat—which had been perched so precariously on the ridge of his brow—had somehow jarred loose and was beginning to roll towards his right eye, causing an electrical signal to be sent to his brain.

“Scratch that itch!” the signal commanded.

“Could you wait a few seconds, we’re a little busy here,” his brain replied.

But the impulse would hear nothing of the brain’s petty concerns.

“Itch!”

Damn. It was a race now between that ball hurtling towards him at 100 miles an hour and that electrical impulse moving at the speed of light.

“Itch!” it commanded again.

“Resist!” Jonathan’s brain shouted back.

Those ten years of major league experience were now coming in handy, because his body was automatically beginning to swing the bat. He could feel the centrifugal force of the wood swinging around his body.

“Itch, damn you!”

“No, not yet! We’re almost there!”

But the urge was getting stronger, and his will was weakening. *“Maybe if I just closed my eyes for a second I could dislodge it...”*

“No, you fool, that’s what it wants,” he heard his brain say.

It was then that Jonathan Bailey felt the pressure on his arms as the bat struck the ball, instantaneously reversing its direction. Then he heard the sound of contact, the unmistakable crack of bat on ball, and immediately knew he had a clean hit, one that should easily score both Guitierrez and Everett and put the Red Sox ahead for good so they could reach the World Series where Jonathan would win the MVP and blast a million home runs and they’d sweep the Series and Jonathan would be a hero and no one could touch him because he was the greatest player ever to—

“Good morning, Boston, that was our own bad boys of rock and roll, Aerosmith, with ‘Same Old Song and Dance.’ It’s six a.m. in the morning here on your Classic Smooth Oldies station -

Damn. Almost made it this time. Jonathan’s hand swung up and over the bed and onto the snooze button on top of the radio.

Silence.

“Jon?”

“Yea?”

“Time to get up.”

Jonathan mentally tried getting back into the ballpark, but found himself cornered by a security guard whose voice sounded just like his wife’s. “I’m sorry, sir you can’t come on the field without a pass.”

Jonathan groaned.

“Jon, did you hear me?”

“Yea, I heard. I can’t come on the field without a pass.”

“What did you say?”

Jonathan slowly opened his eyes, and confirmed his worst fear.

“Jon, come on. Get up. I want to make the bed,” Mallory Bailey said to her husband..

“Why? You planning on having visitors up here?” he asked as he propped himself up and leaned against the headboard.

“Jonathan!”

“No, I mean it. What’s this thing with having to make the bed every day? I certainly don’t care, so if you’re doing it on my account—”

“I’m not doing it for you. I’m doing it for me. No one is going to say that Mallory Bailey doesn’t keep a good house.”

“Who says that? Tell me, who even suggests that?”

“Other women may have help but just because I have to clean this place by myself...”

Jonathan, realizing that the game had finally been called on account of rain, pulled back the covers and stood at attention next to the bed. “See, I’m up,” he proudly demonstrated to his wife, who simply grunted as she set about to straighten the sheets.

As he gazed at his wife bent over the bed, he mused how at one point in their lives such a position would have been deemed an invitation. But now the only thought he could muster was how much trouble the whole thing would be, even if she deigned to acquiesce to his desire. He turned and headed for the bathroom.

“I need you to pick up the dry cleaning today,” she said as she wrestled with the bed spread.

“Fine,” he said, continuing his amble into the bathroom before stopping suddenly.

“No, wait, I can’t.”

“Why not?”

He hesitated just a second before answering. “I’m going into town today.”

“Boston? Why?”

“I’m picking up my tickets today,” he mumbled as he snuck into the bathroom and shut the door.

“Tickets,” she repeated before it sunk in. “Of course, how could I forget,” she said with all the disgust she could muster. From behind the bathroom door Mallory could hear Jonathan brushing his teeth. She walked over and opened the door. “But one thing I can’t take care of are these windows. Are you listening? I’m tired of breaking my back every time I want to open a window around here. Can you hear me?”

Jonathan gargled something that she took as an acknowledgment and continued. “If you got that promotion we wouldn’t have to worry about these windows, you know. We could move into a house that had windows built after the Civil War. Am I right?”

Gurgle.

“You know Mary Beth got all new windows in her house,” Mallory continued. “Never mind the hours she’ll save when she has to clean them but they’ll save a fortune on heating bills. Are you listening to me?”

What Mallory didn’t know was that Jonathan had somehow found his pass and was happily strolling back onto the baseball field at Fenway to the cheers of the adoring thousands. “Bailey, Bailey, Bailey” they chanted as he strode to the plate, the score tied at two runs apiece and the Red Sox with two outs. The public address system reverberated inside the tiny ballpark as the announcer proclaimed “now batting for the Red Sox, your All-Star, Gold glove, Triple Crown-winning centerfielder—”

“Jonathan Bailey!”

Jonathan knew the change in the announcer's voice was not due to a sudden reversal of puberty. It was Mallory, who had walked into the bathroom and found Jonathan in a state of blissful catatonia. He smiled sheepishly, and in doing so dribbled toothpaste on her foot.

It should have been one of those moments that breaks an awful tension, but lately, with Mallory, it had the opposite effect. She stormed out of the bathroom, leaving Jonathan with a mouth full of toothpaste. He stared at the door for a moment, wondering if he should follow her and apologize. Just then he heard the lusty cheers of the Fenway crowd permeate the bathroom. He turned to the stands and waved as the public address announcer resumed his introduction.

“Where was I... Oh, yes, now batting for the Red Sox, he has hit safely in 63 straight games for a new all-time major league record, a remarkable streak in which he has hit over 20 home runs and...”

Jonathan smiled.

Over twenty-five hundred miles away, under a clear Idaho sky so full of stars that their glow cast ghostly shadows across the snow, a lone figure walked to his car. Minutes earlier he had bent over his bed and kissed his sleeping wife gently on the cheek. When she woke, she would find a note he wrote that would explain everything. How he there was unfinished business he had to take care of, and that he loved her and knew she would understand.

With a series of gasps and gurgles, the engine in Jonathan's 1998 Jetta sputtered to a halt in the parking lot of his company, Tennis.net. He stepped out of his car and squinted at the sun glaring off the glass that covered the building like a crystal sheathe. It might have been an impressive sight, except that every other suburban office building is some combination of glass, steel, and red brick, usually curved in the front and rectangular on the sides and back. There's no denying that the psychology works, however. "My firm must be doing O.K.," millions of cubicle gladiators are lulled into believing, "because our building looks just like Microsoft's."

At the moment none of that steel and glass ubiquity mattered to Jonathan Bailey, for he was engaged in an issue much more relevant to his current workday, trying to get the front door of his building open with his security badge. No matter how many times he swiped his laminated employee card through the slot, the door would not budge. Finally, on the fifth try, the door reluctantly popped open. Jonathan glanced around to see if anyone had witnessed his security card wrestling match and, satisfied that the bout was a private one, entered the building and walked upstairs to his office.

Office, of course, being a flimsy term used these days to describe a large open space inside a building, in which are located rows and rows of dull, cloth covered boxes, each and every one the exact same size and shape, known as cubicles. Not that there wasn't an attempt to break up the visual monotony. Lining the outside walls—the only real walls in the place—are paintings that looked as if they had been bought by a secretary whose boss had peeled off a few twenties from a roll of bills and said "see many pounds of art this will buy." So finding the way to your own cubicle is not unlike finding a home in a development in which all the street signs have disappeared. Make a right turn after the painting with the red turtle on the turquoise beach, then a left at the one with the two

triangles and a square and you're there.

Jonathan's cubicle sat across from another rare commodity: a real office. This office actually had a window, which made it even rarer still. And since the office was currently empty made it the object of much lusting and speculation among the cubicle dwellers. All, except for Jonathan. Without a glance at the "real" office across the aisle, he parked himself inside his cubicle and unloaded his essentials; a bag lunch and the Sports section of the *Boston Globe*. He had no sooner flipped the switch to his computer on his desk, when he heard behind him a voice.

"Hey, Johnny! You got 'em?"

Jonathan didn't need to turn around to know it was his office-mate Kenny, or to what he was referring.

"No, I'm getting them at lunch today," Jonathan replied.

"Well just remember who your friends are."

Jonathan turned around and looked cynically at Kenny. "Everyone's my friend at the beginning of the season. Come September I can't give them away."

"That's because by then they're ten games out."

"That was last year."

"And the year before that," Kenny said glibly.

As if on cue, another one of Jonathan's co-workers, Phil LaJean, appeared at the cubicle entrance. "And the year before that," he said with a smile.

Jonathan had no chance to reply before Marie Tedrow made her presence known.

"And the year before that!"

"Don't your necks hurt jumping on and off the Red Sox bandwagon?" Jon asked with a smile.

Everybody laughed. It was always fun to visit with Jonathan but more so when the topic of conversation was his beloved Red Sox. Jonathan was a life-long fan, but not so fanatical that he couldn't accept a little good-natured ribbing, even at his team's expense. It was just one of the many things that made him so popular with some of his co-workers.

"Hey Jon," Phil said as the laughter died down. "We were going to grab a cup. Wanna come along?"

"Oh, gee, thanks, but if I'm gonna go out later I better get a few things done," he replied.

"Suit yourself. Bring you back anything?"

"No, but thanks," Jon said as he turned to his computer.

Phil and Marie began walking down the aisle when Phil noticed that Kenny was still standing in front of Jon's cubicle.

"Kenny, you coming?" Phil called out.

"Yea, I'm on my way," Kenny called back. At that moment Jon turned to see his colleague still hovering at the opening of his cubicle.

"You and me is pals, right Jon?" Kenny mouthed in cartoon-like fashion. As he stepped away from Jon he continued to gesture comically. "Tickets. You. Me. Red Sox. Right, buddy?"

Kenny disappeared down the aisle and Jon turned back to his computer, which sat patiently waiting for him to enter his network password. (No surprise here: it's Fenway.) Jon then opened up a spreadsheet and prepared to begin work on his latest assignment, when he inexplicably found himself turning around and look at the empty office across the aisle. He stared at the teakwood Valhalla, trying, but failing, to muster just a fraction of the desire that office generated in so many others, when his view was suddenly

blocked by the back of a suit.

“So, you gonna ask for new carpeting?”

Jonathan recognized the voice. It was Neil Bergen from Distribution, who often came over to the marketing side of the building to match cufflinks with some of the other “go-getters.” Which explained why Jon was so surprised that Neil was speaking to him, as Jon wore neither cufflinks nor the mantle of go-getter. He was about to respond when he heard another voice say “Now, now, you know Ross hasn’t made a decision yet.”

It was Brian. Brian Stokes. The sort of guy who would beat up other kids for their lunch money, spend half on baseball cards and bubble gum and then make a big deal about putting the other half into the collection plate. The sort of guy who was a Red Sox fan until October, then suddenly became a Yankees fan when they made it to the Series. The turd.

“Oh, please. Everyone knows the job is in the bag,” Jon heard Neil say.

“You won’t mind if I wait for Ross to tell me that before I start picking out new curtains?”

Neil laughed and sneered at the same time. “Come on, who else is it gonna be?” he asked he turned around.

“Bailey!” he yelled out, frozen at the sight of Jonathan in his cubicle.

“Stranger things have happened,” Jon heard Neil say as he got up from his chair walked towards them. “There’s no rule that says it can’t be—

“Bailey!” he yelled out as he too saw that Jonathan had heard the entire conversation. “Hey Jon. How’s it going?”

Jon looked at the two men standing in front of him and smiled. He thought of a cartoon he had once seen in a paper of a strange-looking, amorphous creature sitting

awkwardly on a hard-backed chair with the caption “An Uncomfortable Silence,” and imagined that creature hovering above them.

Neil went first. “Listen, Jon, we didn’t mean anything...”

“Yea, it’s all just speculation, you know?” Brian added.

“It’s all right, don’t worry about it,” he heard himself say. *Other men would stretch this moment*, he knew, but that just wasn’t in him.

“You do a great job...” Brian was saying.

They must really be embarrassed if they’re sucking up to me, Jon thought. “So you think I’d actually be considered for the manager’s position, huh?” Jon asked out loud.

“Oh. Sure, buddy, sure” Neil said with all the sincerity he could muster.

“Absolutely,” Brian added, with no more believability.

Jonathan decided to release the Uncomfortable Silence that was hovering above them and realized the best way was to do that was to leave his own cube. “Well, like you guys say, stranger things have happened, right? Excuse me, I gotta grab some files from accounting before the meeting,” he said as he squeezed past them and walked down the aisle.

Neil and Brian breathed for the first time in several minutes as they watched him walk down the corridor.

“So, what do you think?” Brian asked, looking into the office.

“After eight years in the same job in the same cubicle what do you think? Poor bastard doesn’t have a shot” Neil replied.

“No, I meant about the maroon carpeting.”

“Oh. The nice thick pile, right?”

“Of course...”

By the time Neil and Brian saw Jonathan again they had all forgotten the incident outside Jon's cube. Perhaps it was a "guy" thing about putting uncomfortable incidents away or maybe it was just that in all honesty they all knew that Jon wasn't a serious candidate for the office, anyway. Jon could be many things, they knew: industrious, capable, and useful, sure, but no one ever accused Jon of being desirous of offices with thick carpeting. The line on Jon was simple: You could count on him to take an order, but couldn't imagine him giving one.

So when Neil, Brian, and Jonathan saw each other at the weekly staff meeting there was no residue from the Uncomfortable Silence. Just the usual banal chit-chat that preceded every staff meeting as the people positioned themselves around the large mahogany table in the paneled room.

Ahhh, conference room positioning.

An anthropologist could make a career studying where and why people sit at one of these meetings. Some reasons are obvious. For instance, the unprepared or soon-to-retire take up the far end of the table. The "go-getters" look for a place closer to the front of the room—but not so close that their desire is obvious, so they back off by a couple of chairs. This suits the younger, less experienced employees, who simply want to get their "sees" and cluster in the chairs close to or next to the head of the table.

That leaves the seats in the middle of the table. Here the motivations become more complicated and the employees more diverse. This group includes the obnoxiously self-assured types—the ones who believe that they don't have to put on a show for anybody, yet desperately want everyone to notice that they aren't putting on a show. The middle is also where you will find the people who honestly have no agenda at all. These are people

who – if it can be believed – are actually too busy working to think about showing up early enough to a meeting just so they can “choose” their seats. Or they are people like Phil, a new employee with barely a month at Tennis.net, who hasn’t established an agenda. Not yet, anyway.

Jonathan was also one of those who sat in the middle of the table. But his reason was simple —and self-preserving: it was the best place to hide. Suffice it to say that Jane Goodall would have a field day in Conference Room A.

Positioning complete and everyone in their places, the low buzz of chatter continued until the door flew open and Gene Walker, the vice president of the division, entered. A rarity in the ever-young world of high-tech start-ups, Gene actually had gray hair, wrinkles, and a vice-presidency.

“Admiral on the bridge!” yelled one of the go-getters sitting near the head of the table yelled out.

“That’s Brian,” Marie whispered to Phil. That she found Brian’s demonstration annoying was evident. “He does that every time Gene walks into a room because the old man was in the Navy.”

“Good morning, people, let’s get started,” they heard the V.P. say. “I got an email from the San Jose office about the new ad the agency cooked up, and I need someone to follow up for me on possible placement.”

Aha! A fresh piece of meat had been thrown into the middle of the watering hole. Which young buck would be the first to grab it? Phil looked around the room and saw several pairs of eyes dart across the table. A hand twitched. Backs stiffened. An arm shuddered on the far end of the table, but not before Brian’s hand went up.

“I’ll do it, sir.”

Gene smiled. “Thank you Brian. I’ll have the email forwarded to you. It has the all the contact information.”

Brian had played it well, and his follow-through was perfect. No smile that could be misconstrued as a smirk, just a nod to the boss as he dropped his eyes, nodded his head, and scribbled a note into his ever-present Palm Pilot.

“Next is the sales conference in Houston,” Phil heard Gene say. “Any volunteers to join me on a fishing expedition?”

A chance to forage with the head of the pride? This time three hands rose at once. Here was a moment frozen in time, as several paws reached for the same piece of meat simultaneously. Who would lay claim to the prize? Who would withdraw rather than risk getting clawed? Phil, his arms safely at his side, smiled as he watched the stand-off.

Suddenly the air was pierced with a voice. It was Neil.

“I’ve already been working on the display for the booth, sir, I’d be happy to—”

“Thank you Neil. Don’t forget to make sure to work with the PR agency to make sure the messaging connects with the yearly plan.”

“Yes, sir,” Neil said, unable to suppress the smug look of success.

Well played, Phil thought, and he smiled as he watched the other two poor bastards try to lower their hands without being noticed. Now his eyes swept around the room. The 'unprepareds,' the about-to-retires, the go-getters, and even the no-agendas, everyone seemed caught up in the splendid game being played out before them. Well, almost everyone. There, at the edge of the corporate watering hole watching the other members of the pride claw each other, Phil spied Jonathan, his serene countenance very much out of place in the wild.

Phil began to wonder if Jon was incapable of generating any interest at all in the

meeting when there appeared... could it be... yes, it was: a look of sheer determination in his eyes. What was the motivation, Phil wondered. What could possibly motivate Jon into action? Then he heard Gene's voice. "Now as many of you know—and some of you have been working very hard on this—we're looking at switching our on-line purchasing agent. I'd like to get a few people together in a separate meeting. So let me see... Jim... I'd like you to be there. Joan? How about it?"

That was it! Gene wasn't waiting for volunteers this time, he was picking them himself, and Phil could barely contain a smile as Jonathan did his best impression of mahogany paneling.

"Kenny, I'd like you to help out. And...

"Just one more, Jon, hang in there, buddy," Phil found himself rooting as Gene cast his eyes around the table.

"And... Anne, that should do it, I think. Why don't you all come to my office at two and I'll explain what I'm looking for, okay?"

The four chosen ones nod gratefully, while across the table, Phil couldn't help but notice that Jon looked very much like a prisoner on a firing squad informed that his executioners had just run out of bullets, would you mind being a good sport and going home and forgetting the whole matter?

Back in his cubicle, Jonathan tried to concentrate on his work, without much success. But it wasn't the dodging of the executioner's bullet back in the conference room that occupied his mind - he was far too blithe about such things to dwell on them. What Jon was feeling was the joy of anticipation that every child experiences as they run,

a dollar bill clutched firmly in their hands, to an ice cream truck on a hot summer's day. Surely a daily dose all summer long of 'Hoodsies' would dull the palate for such things? So thinks an adult. A nine-year-old knows better. A nine-year-old knows that when you find something you like to eat or do, you continue to eat it or do it because who knows when the opportunity to indulge will end?

Jonathan understood that, even if he couldn't articulate the thought. What he instinctively knew was soon he would be on his way to Boston for an annual pilgrimage to his favorite place on earth, Fenway Park. To get there he would endure Boston's crushing traffic along its too-narrow streets. Once near the ball park would spend an aggravating half-hour (at least) looking for a parking space. Finally, at the ticket office, he would pay the highest prices in the country for uncomfortable seats in a dingy, outdated ball park that opened a week after the Titanic sank.

But, as the nine year-old will attest, when you find something you like to do you do it, because you never know how long it will last. Jonathan Bailey thought about that as he recalled the day when he was seven years old and his father first took him out of school to make the pilgrimage to Fenway to buy tickets to the Red Sox. Out of school! Can you image the unrestrained jealousy from the other kids? The ritual was replayed every year until Jonathan was seventeen, that awful year when Alexander suffered a stroke and died right there on the line at the Gillette plant in South Boston, not three days before that year's trip. They waked him for two days and buried him the third, and on the way back from the cemetery Jonathan went to Fenway, just as father and son had planned, because you never know when the chance to do what you like to do will end.

That is why Jonathan didn't need the alarm on his PC to tell him that it was time to head for his car and drive to Boston. He had already grabbed his jacket and was out of

his cubicle and heading down the aisle when the beeping from the computer began. From behind, he heard Kenny, in his cube, yelling “you and me is pals, ain’t we Jon? Pals. Yea, sure.”

Jonathan laughed and waved without looking back as he swept out of the office and into the parking lot to his car. Before he knew it the last green of the suburbs was far behind him and the giant Citgo sign in Kenmore Square was ahead, meaning he was within striking distance of his destination, Fenway Park. Now to find a parking space. Jonathan laughed at a joke he once heard that the British weren’t beaten out of Boston during the revolution, they just couldn’t find a parking space.

A parking space near Kenmore Square was not easy. If you know Boston you know that the square sits hard by Boston University, an institution that was more of a real estate development company than school of higher education. In the eighties the school expanded by leaps and bounds, buying up buildings in the area as fast as they could so that they could expand their curriculum for such lofty higher education pursuits as hotel management. No kidding. Twenty grand a semester so some kid from Long Island could take a course in wine tasting.

Since B.U. was in session finding a parking space was going to be even more difficult than usual. As Jonathan steered his car down Brookline Avenue he wondered how students could manage to take a whole day’s worth of classes when parking meters in Boston only gave you two hours at a time. *Maybe these kids were smarter than we given them credit for*, he thought

Crossing over the bridge across the Massachusetts Turnpike, Jonathan drove as slowly as he could while he trolled for a parking spot. Thinking that a side street held more promise, Jonathan slowed his car to a crawl as he prepared to make a turn.

Naturally, the always patient and understanding Boston drivers behind him were more than happy to give Jonathan every opportunity to—

“Move it, asshole!”

Jonathan obliged, turning the car down Lansdowne Street. From behind him on Brookline Avenue the driver continued expressing his opinion, giving even further proof that Boston may not be as big a city as New York, but the people here know all the same words.

Lansdowne Street is one of the Boston’s most interesting streets. Here under the shadow of Fenway Park’s left field wall, known affectionately as the Green Monster, are some of the trendiest night clubs in the city. At night, limousines and taxi cabs filled with well-dressed party-goers pass kids with baseball gloves who look to catch a home run hit over the Monster. During the day, delivery trucks heading for the ballpark or the nightclubs or any one of the hundreds of businesses in the area, fight for curb space.

“Only an idiot would look for a spot here,” Jonathan was about to say out loud when he saw it, nestled between a bread truck and fire hydrant. A parking space. Incredible. His eyes darted up and down Lansdowne Street. Surely someone else had spotted it, too. But no one had, and without hesitation he backed his car into its own personal, if temporary, Valhalla. The engine had barely sputtered to a stop before Jonathan was out of the car, locking the door, and reaching for the pocket-full of quarters he had brought for the meter. He was still feeling the exhilaration of finding the spot when he saw a sight that literally took his breath away. There were fifteen minutes of time on the meter, perhaps enough time to take care of business at the park. “This has got to be a good sign,” he said as he playfully patted the parking meter and slipped the quarters back into his pocket.

His car in a legal space and the meter fed, Jonathan allowed himself a few moments to take in the sights. The back side of the Green Monster loomed some 40 feet above him and cast a heavy shadow across Lansdowne Street. Way above that, from the roof of the old ballpark, he could hear the American flags being pummeled by the brisk late-March wind racing in from the harbor. He looked up at the flags and felt the last vestiges of the winter's wind cut through his jacket and he just had to smile. It was almost time.

“Hey, man,” he heard a voice say, breaking his reverie. “You’re a Red Sox fan, right?”

Jonathan lowered his head to street level, and groaned to himself when he saw that standing in his way were several people holding hand-made signs that read “SAVE FENWAY PARK.” Before him stood a short, puffy little man with a graying beard and granny glasses, holding a sign in one hand and a clipboard in the other. He looked at Jonathan with great earnestness.

“You don’t want them to tear down our history, do you, man?” he asked. “Of course not. So how about signing our petition to Save Fenway Park?”

Jonathan smiled politely at him and, as he walked up Lansdowne Street towards the ticket office around the corner, made some lame gestures with his hands to indicate he was in a hurry. The puffy little man with the clipboard didn’t waste a moment and immediately accosted someone else as Jonathan made good his escape down the block.

Two left turns and Jonathan was on Yawkey Way, where the ticket office and main entrances to Fenway Park are located. He glanced across the street at the souvenir shop and thought about buying the latest style baseball cap, but a glance at the clock outside a bank across the street reminded him that the lunch hour was just that, an hour. He entered the ticket office.

Fenway Park is old, as everybody in Boston will tell you, but in some places you can really smell its age. Like here in the ticket office, where decades of cigarette and cigar smoke mix with the perspiration of the thousands of fans over the years who, like Jonathan, felt that buying their ducats at the ball park was as necessary part of the experience as seeing the game in person. There were three windows with several vertical bars that looked like they came from an old-style bank or as racetrack betting windows. Over the windows hung a weathered sign that read: PURCHASE TICKETS HERE. Several people stood patiently in line at each window.

Jonathan walked to a fourth window over which hung an equally beaten sign labeled WILL CALL and, since there was no one on line, stepped right up to the bars, behind which sat a young man in a dull gray shirt and even duller expression who barely glanced up from his newspaper when Jonathan spoke.

“Hi. I’m here to pick up tickets I paid for over the phone,” Jon said. “Last name is Bailey.”

“Uh huh. First name?”

“Jonathan.”

“Wait here,” the young man said as he disappeared through a back door.

The remark struck Jon as funny. Of course he was going to wait. Where would he go?

A few second later the young man re-appeared. “Got any I.D.?”

“Sure,” Jon said as he fished through his wallet for his driver’s license. “In here somewhere,” he mumbled apologetically as his hands fumbled around his wallet. “Here we go.” He handed his license to the ticket seller, who barely glanced at the picture or at Jonathan before he handed the license and an envelope through the bars.

“Thanks,” Jonathan said as he shoved the license back into his wallet before tearing open the envelope.

The ticket seller watched as Jonathan examined his bounty. “You know,” he said in rather annoyed tone, “we could have mailed those to you.”

“I could watch the games on TV, too,” Jon replied. His remark drew smiles from a few of the other fans waiting in the other lines, but the ticket taker just rolled his eyes. Jonathan didn’t see that—not that he would have cared - because he was already out the door heading for his car.

Rounding the corner back onto Lansdowne Street, Jonathan was relieved to see that the SAVE FENWAY man was engaged in a shouting match with someone. “I can’t believe you of all people would be willing to sacrifice this ballpark for a luxury box you’re never going to see...” he heard the puffy little man say pompously.

“Ahhh, I’ll bet you’ve never even seen a game from start to finish...” the old man he was arguing with counter loudly.

There was no need for Jonathan to keep listening. He had heard this same argument for ten years and no one ever won. No one except the guy who got paid to update the cost estimate every year the thing didn’t get built. Besides, it been such a good day what with the parking space and free time on the meter—the meter. He no sooner had the thought in his mind when he saw that depressing, bright orange rectangle. “Shit,” he heard himself say out loud. “I knew this day was going too well.”

Then Jonathan looked at the meter. There was still time on it! Emboldened, he looked around and saw, down the street, a meter maid writing out another ticket to a delivery truck. “Miss,” he called out.

No reaction. Her head down, she continued to write.

“Excuse me, Miss?”

Head still bowed, he heard her grumble out of one side of her mouth. “Yea?”

“Look, this meter, it still has time on it.”

On cue, there was a buzz from inside the meter and a VIOLATION flag popped up in the window.

“Not anymore” she said without emotion, as she slapped the ticket on the truck’s window and continued her walk down Lansdowne Street.

Jonathan watched her waddle down the street. “I could fight this, you know,” in a voice just barely audible even to himself. Then he thought of the time he would need to return to Boston for the hearing. He thought of the difficulty in trying to find a parking space near City Hall so he could fight the ticket. Then he figured the odds that the judge or magistrate or head meter maid would rule in his favor and all for what, a lousy twenty dollar parking ticket?

Jonathan got back in his car and headed back to work.

The voice on the radio was grating. “Welcome back to the Guy Wayland show here on WBFN, the Boston Fan. It’s an open line day but none of you wants to talk about the Bruins or the Celtics—even though both are headin’ for the playoffs. No, all you guys wanna talk about today are the Sox, who haven’t lost a spring training game yet so you pinheads got them waltzing away with the World Series. Just like Bill, who’s on his car phone. Welcome to the show, Bill. What’s up?”

“You’re the pinhead, man. I thought you was a fan,” the agitated voice on the phone said. “Opening day is next month and you’ve already given up on them, man.”

“I haven’t given up,” Guy said with just a touch of impatience. “I’m just not ready to foolishly predict that something is going to happen that hasn’t happened in almost 90 years.”

“We all know how long it’s been since they last won the Series,” the increasingly agitated voice replied. “What has that got to do with this year’s team?”

“You think that this team has what it takes to break the Curse? You really think they’re gonna be any different than last year’s team—”

At the radio station from where Guy was broadcasting, Joe Murphy leaned against the back wall of the darkened producer’s booth and watched the talk host work. A year into his tenure as general manager of WBFN, Joe was performing a time-honored ritual of the client visit. This was the chance to give some linoleum salesman or garage owner the opportunity to see the inner workings of the radio station on which they would—if Joe’s sales pitch worked - be buying air time. Today it was Jerry Wizniowski, the owner and operator of a chain of Boston-area sub shops, getting the red carpet treatment.

Murphy, with his quick wit and map of Ireland that decorated his weathered face, seemed a natural to run a Boston radio station. Never mind that an Italian-American was finishing up his third term as mayor. Legends die hard and Boston still resonates with the lore (and lure) of the Irish. Joe used that, as well as his uncanny ability for negotiation, to his advantage. And there in the broadcast booth, surrounded by posters of sports stars and swimsuit models, was his greatest prize, a 263-pound revenue-producing machine known as Guy Wayland.

Unkempt would be the most generous word you could use to describe the man sitting behind the small console in the room just beyond the sound-proof glass. Jabba the Hut would be crueler, but more accurate. Clutching an unlit cigar in one hand a an as-

yet-un-consumed piece of Danish in the other, Jabba—that is, Guy—sat amongst half-empty coffee cups, fast food containers, and crumpled up pages of old faxes, newspaper clippings, and commercial copy.

The talk show host was a radio lifer who had worked, as the old “WKRP in Cincinnati” jingle rhapsodized, “town to town, up and down the dial,” without much to show for it except a shrinking bank account, expanding waistline, and lengthening resume. Though station-hopping was common in radio, Wayland’s obnoxious, confrontational approach off the air had made it a life-style, and he seemed destined to remain in the “middle” markets while eking out a living on free donuts and coffee. Guy was working at a Columbus, Ohio station when Joe Murphy, who had been the general manager of a rival station in that town, got his job in Boston and hired the rotund talk host sight unseen.

Joe had grown up in South Boston (where else?), went to Boston College (where else?) and even worked as a salesman for a few years at an FM station in the Back Bay, a job he joked was his chance to see a foreign country close up. Joe knew Boston and knew that Wayland was exactly what this floundering sports station needed. In fact, when Wayland squeezed into his office that first day, Joe knew he had struck paydirt. “The guy doesn’t give a shit what people think of him,” Joe remembers saying to his wife, “and he’s going to own that time shift in a month.”

“But he’s so... gross,” his wife tactfully replied after meeting Wayland at a station function.

Joe’s response was typical Joe. “Radio is a like masturbation. You don’t have to look your best to do it well.”

“Yuck,” his wife had said.

Joe smiled as he looked in the booth and listened as Guy performed surgery on his latest victim, a caller whose agitation rose with every syllable

“You know, this is all you guys can do, criticize and—”

“Wait a minute, what guys?” Guy interrupted.

“You guys in the media who—”

“Oh, Jeez, here we go again. The Sox blow a three run lead going into the ninth inning and it’s the media’s fault.”

“I never said it was you guys fault. But how about looking at the bright spots once in a while?”

“Bill, are you a parent?” Guy asked.

“Yea.”

“So lemme ask you. Your kid burns down the house. You gonna compliment him on how resourceful he was lighting the match?”

“All right, lemme ask you,” the caller responded. “Your high-school kid wins second place in a contest. You gonna get angry because he didn’t finish first?”

Joe smiled as he listened to the level of antagonism rise. This was what he was paying that fat slob for. He watched with amusement as the caller suddenly stopped talking and Guy, who had stuffed the last of a donut into his mouth, had to expel the unused portion into his hand so he could speak.

“Bill, we’re not talking about amateur athletes here, we’re talking about professionals who get paid a lot of money to play a game,” Guy said as small bits of pastry showered the microphone.

“Doesn’t mean they’re not people, man. I’m just saying no matter how much you get paid it’s gotta get to you when all you hear about is history from... you know, you

guys.”

Ahhh, there it was, the magic word. History. Guy looked up and saw Joe standing behind his producer. He winked at his boss. “Bill, how long you been livin’ in New England? How long you been a Red Sox fan? History is all we got! We sure don’t have any World Championships!”

“Wayland, you are such a—”

Before the caller could release the invective, Guy’s hand came from out of nowhere and slapped a button on his control board. The button was attached to the most important piece of equipment at a talk radio station – a delay system that prevents callers from saying something rude on the air. Rude, of course, being a moving target these days, although the “seven words” of George Carlin fame were still verboten.

“Well, thanks for your call. 1-800-BOSTON-FAN if you want to reach us. I’m Guy Wayland, and you’re listening to 720, the Boston Fan. I’ll be back after this.” Guy’s surprisingly nimble fingers reached out to the small control board and with the push of a button shut off his microphone, after which he sat back in his chair and, with his other hand, re-stuffed the half-eaten donut into his mouth. On the other side of the glass, client-to-be Jerry Wizniowski looked like he was going to be sick.

Joe smiled as he leaned over the producer and pushed the intercom button. “Hey Guy, how’s it going?”

Guy smiled back and motioned to the telephone, its bank of incoming calls completely filled with blinking lights. “You tell me,” he replied with a smirk.

“Guy, I want you to say hello to Jerry Wizniowski,” Joe said. “Jerry owns the Boston Beef Sub Shops.”

“Hey Jerry, nice to meet you,” a suddenly pleasant Guy Wayland said into the

intercom. “Joe, don’t forget to remind Jerry that I’m available for personal endorsements. Just have him send over a few samples—”

“Guy,” a voice interrupted. It was Wayland’s producer, a young man in long blonde hair and a rude T-shirt. “Hate to interrupt your grocery shopping, but you’ve got a live spot for Syrian’s coming up in ten seconds.”

Wayland sneered at the boy and flipped through the loose-leaf binder in front of him. He found the page he was looking for just as the producer turned on his microphone and the "ON AIR" light blinked on. Joe, Jerry, and the producer listened as a remarkably sincere Guy Wayland said, over the air, “you know, nobody knows furniture like Syrian’s, the area’s number one source for the finest selection of bedroom, living room, and dining room furniture. I myself own a dazzling, that’s right I used the word dazzling, that’s how much I love this couch, dazzling showpiece from Syrian’s that cost only...”

Joe motioned to the producer, who on cue lowered the volume. “Well Jerry, what do you say we go my office and talk?”

It took the visitor a few moments to tear himself away from the sight of Guy and his crumb-encrusted mouth. “Sure. Thanks for the tour, Joe. I’ll pay you back one day by taking you to see the pigs at the zoo.”

Joe laughed and waved gratuitously at Guy, who smiled wanly back. “That pig in there has paid for my new Lexus. And my wife’s. If I thought his heart would hold up I’d put him on morning and afternoon drive. Now how about we talk about what he and WBFN can do for Boston Beef Sub Shops...”

As Joe and Jerry exited they could hear Guy yelling at another caller. “You think it’s just a coincidence that ever since 1920 when the Red Sox sold Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees that the Yankees have won 26 World Series and the Red Sox none? I

don't think so!"

Fifteen miles away outside his glass and steel office building, pulling into a parking spot, Jonathan Bailey shut off the radio. "What a jerk," he said to himself. Then he mused for a second before adding, honestly, "Too bad he's right."

CHAPTER 3.

Game Time

“No, man, give me a guy who can blast the ball out of the park,” Kenny was saying to Phil and Marie.

As they did just about every work day, Kenny, Phil, Marie, and Jonathan sat at a table in the Tennis.net cafeteria and waxed philosophically about everything from the cost of toilet tissue to the latest news from Washington. Today, out of respect for Jon and his pilgrimage, the subject was one closer to all their hearts.

“You’re a typical Red Sox fan,” Marie said. You got that left field wall and forget every baseball fundamental. You need speed and pitching.”

“That’s how we did it in Milwaukee,” Phil boasted.

“Milwaukee,” Marie said with disgust. “You guys haven’t won it since Reagan was in office. In his first term!”

“And you guys haven’t won it since Woodrow Wilson!” Phil shot back. The response generated laughter not only from Marie and Kenny, but from a few people at other tables close enough to hear.

“Good one from the new guy,” Marie said, as she returned to her lunch, a carefully prepared salad as Phil did the same to some left-over Chinese food. But Kenny just sat

there, staring glumly at the unwrapped sandwich before him.

“Is there something wrong?” asked Marie.

“My wife made me chicken salad again,” Kenny replied. “I hate chicken salad.”

Phil smiled.

“What’s so funny about that?” Kenny asked.

“Oh, I was just thinking about this joke. There's these two guys eating lunch at work, see, and one guy is complaining about what he's got for lunch, see? ‘I got chicken salad, he says.’

“It's about me, isn't it?” Kenny interrupted.

“Is what about you?”

“The joke.”

“No, it's not about you.”

“Then why is the guy eating chicken salad?”

“He doesn't have to be eating chicken salad,” Phil explained patiently. “Just because he's eating chicken salad doesn't mean it's you.”

“Then give him something else to eat. Besides chicken salad.”

“All right—”

“I hate chicken salad.”

“Fine. It's egg salad.”

“Egg salad?”

“Yea. Egg salad,” Phil said with exasperation. “Let’s say he hates egg salad.”

“I love egg salad. How could anyone hate egg salad?”

Phil wasn’t sure if Kenny was putting him on, but at this point he was hell bent to finish this joke, even if it killed them both. “I don't know. He just does. All right? So

he starts complaining. 'Egg salad,' he says. 'I hate egg salad. There's nothing I hate more than egg salad.' So the other guys says to him, 'Why don't you have your wife make you something else.' So the first guy says 'I can't. I make my own lunch.'"

Marie giggled and Phil smiled, but Kenny just sat there looking mournfully at his sandwich. "I wish I had egg salad," he said. "I love egg salad."

Marie was still giggling when Brian walked into the cafeteria to a smattering of applause from several tables. No fan of Brian, she did not join in the demonstration, instead leaning over to Phil and Kenny and said, in hushed tones. "Boy, I just feel so badly for Jon."

"Yea," Kenny said sympathetically.

"Whattya mean?" Phil asked.

"You didn't hear? Brian got the district manager's job," Marie replied.

"Yep, got the office and everything," Kenny said.

"I hear he's going for the maroon carpet."

"The real thick pile, too, I'll bet."

"Uh huh."

"Have they told Jon yet?"

"No," Marie answered. "They just announced it with an email and Jon's been out getting his tickets so he couldn't have seen it."

"Poor guy, he'll be crushed," Phil said, shaking his head sadly.

Marie let out a small laugh. "Jon, crushed? You must be new around here."

"I am new. I started last month, remember?"

"Jon is just not the get upset kind of guy," Kenny explained.

Phil shook his head. "Well. I'm sorry, but I can't believe that this won't bother

him.”

“I didn’t say it wouldn’t bother him, but upset, that’s a different story.”

“Come on, a guy works how many years and someone with less experience comes in and—”

“Hey look, Jon’s back!” Marie yelled out frantically as Jon suddenly appeared at the door.

“There’s my buddy with the tickets!” Kenny added with a broad smile.

Marie and Kenny looked anxiously at Phil. “Hi Jon,” Phil mumbled as he buried his face in his Chinese food.

“Brilliant repartee, Phil,” Marie whispered.

With the rest of the cafeteria looked on sympathetically, Jon stared at Phil, Kenny, and Marie for several moments.

“So, what’s going on?” Jon asked, breaking – but not killing – the silence.

Hovering over head, old friend Uncomfortable Silence watched as the entire room held its collective breath waiting see what Marie, Phil, or Kenny would say. Mercifully, the tension was broken when Gene Walker, walking past the cafeteria back to his office, saw Jon talking to his friends.

“Bailey,” he said, leaning into the room, “would you come into my office when you’re done with lunch?”

Gene disappeared down the hall and Jon turned back to look at his friends. “Must be that corporate jet I asked for,” he said with a laugh. He turned to turned to leave and got as far as the door before he stopped and saw their grim faces. He scowled. “Brian got the job, right?”

The three of them nodded.

“Is that all?” he said, and then smiled. His three friends breathed a collective sigh of relief and smiled back. Jon’s grin got even bigger. *So much for the ‘faceless corporation’ everyone was wailing about*, he thought. As far as Jon was concerned, this corporation had some beautiful faces. He turned and headed for Gene’s office.

The peaks of Idaho’s snow-capped mountains had long been replaced by seemingly endless stretches of flat Iowa farmland. Now at the home of an old friend, he was spending a few days resting, reminiscing, and speaking to his wife on the phone. He smiled at his good fortune when, during that first, tentative call, she told him that the note had not been a surprise, that she knew eventually he was going to have make this trip, and that she loved him and missed him but more than anything wished him luck.

He had hung up after that first conversation and contemplated heading west and returning home. All those years of being on the road he never got used to hearing her voice over the telephone, and it always made him a little sad. But there was a strength and sincerity in her voice when she said “do what you have to do,” and he resolved to complete his mission before going home.

The next day he was back on the road, going east.

“I won’t bullshit you, Jon. It’s not that we don’t think you aren’t working hard enough or that the work you do isn’t good enough. That’s not the issue. But the fact is that we needed someone who could be proactive and give us the big ideas we need to remain competitive. You’re still a valuable member of the team, and I hope the fact that

Brian hasn't been here as long as you have will cause any problems.”

Jonathan Bailey opened his eyes and looked at his wife.

“That’s it?” asked Mallory. She and Jonathan were alone in the living room of their modest home in Billerica, a bedroom community in the Boston area. It was the sort of house in the sort of neighborhood with which just about any reasonable person could be satisfied, but few are truly happy. To Jon, it was a nice step up and away from the West End tenement of his grandfather. To Mallory, it wasn't far enough.

“Pretty much,” replied an exhausted Jonathan. Mallory had been grilling him pretty good for the past few hours and he was getting tired. “Look, Mal, it's not the first promotion I've lost and it sure as hell won't be the last.”

“And you're proud of that.”

“No, but I'm not ashamed, either.”

“Well, what are you?”

“I'm just a guy who does his job the best way he can,” Jonathan said with a touch of pride. “I don't think there's anything wrong with that.”

“Nothing wrong with a promotion, either, once in a while,” Mallory said as she started to walk towards the kitchen.

“I'm not saying there would be, but when it doesn't happen, getting upset doesn't solve anything.”

Mallory stopped dead in her tracks and turned around, hissing. “Oooh, I never realized how annoying even-temperedness could be.”

“I'm sorry. Would you like me to throw something? Maybe break a lamp?”

That was the wrong thing for Jonathan to say and he knew it immediately, as her eyes swept around the modestly furnished room. “Maybe you should. Might improve

things.”

That will rile him up, Mallory thought. But Jonathan just stood there, helpless, absolutely uncertain what to do or say. Disgusted with his complete inability (or unwillingness) to defend himself, Mallory dropped onto the couch and lay there, face up, covering her face with her arm. “God damn it.”

Jonathan looked at his wife, prone on the couch. He crouched down next to her and gently took her free hand in his. “Maybe we shouldn’t go tonight,” he said softly.

Mallory was on her feet in a flash. “Oh no, the hell we won’t. I’m not giving up a night at the club. We’re going and we’re going to have fun, damn it, you hear me?”

There comes a point when you know the governor is not going to call with that reprieve. That’s when you walk as proudly as you can down that last mile, or, in this case, up the stairs, to get dressed. “Oh yea, this is going to be fun...” Jonathan said as he got up and headed to the bedroom.

Mallory was right behind him. “Maybe if you were a member and we could go anytime we wanted. But we’re not. Only managers and directors and vice-presidents can afford the memberships. So we have to wait for someone to take pity on us and invite us before can go” She accentuated the ‘p’ in pity with such force that Jonathan, though he was on the far side of the room at the bottom of the stairs, actually winced. But he didn’t say a word as he grabbed the banister and hoisted himself up the steps, which of course only further enraged her. “Jonathan, are you listening to me? Jonathan, I need this, damn it!”

He froze. Maybe he should say something. She ‘needed’ this, she said. Like the life they had was so awful that she felt the need for repayment. Yes, it was time he said something. This little “agreement” of theirs, did it mean that she could abuse him like

this and order him around? He had needs and rights too, didn't he? Of course he did, and it was time that she respected those needs and rights. He would speak to her. When she got upstairs. Or maybe on the way to the club. Yes, that was a much better, in the car where they were alone and then the fight would have to stop when they arrived. Then again, it would just upset her more before such a big night. Maybe he should wait until after the evening was over. Yes, that made a lot more sense. She would have had a few drinks and danced and maybe then have calmed down. Of course, if she was calmed down why get her all upset again? Things were just so much more pleasant when she wasn't thinking about windows or manager's jobs or membership in the club.

By the time Jonathan got to the top of the stairs he had definitely positively made up his mind about what he had to say to Mallory.

"Mallory?" He looked at her with clarity.

"Yes?"

"Should I wear the red striped or solid blue tie?"

As Jonathan drove his Jetta past the imposing, classic Victorian-era façade of the Mattapoissett Gold Club ("Park in the back" Mallory commanded, "I don't want anyone seeing our car...") he couldn't help thinking of that old refrain, 'I'm from Boston, home of the bean and the cod, where the Lowells talk only to Cabots, and the Cabots talk only to God.'

The building was beautiful and the grounds immaculate, Jonathan thought. The Cabots and Lowells who actually founded this place would have been pleased to see their retreat so well maintained, though they would be less enthusiastic over the membership

list which now contained a fair share of names which ended in vowels. Even more so, what surely would have confused the heck of the old Brahmins who made their dough from railroad, coal, and shipping, would be the source of the membership fees paid by the Murphys, Langones, and Schwartzes.

There were the older members, a mix of junk-bonders from the 1980s and oil or gold speculators from the 1970s. Many of the club's younger members were entrepreneurs whose businesses started in classic high-tech start-up style, either building prototypes by hand on their children's Ping-Pong table in the basement, or writing software with several used PCs in a kitchen between classes at Harvard or Worcester Polytech. Some of their companies had been in business for years and never even made a dime but some hot-shot analyst on Wall Street with a newsletter had anointed them the 'next wave' and before you can say I.P.O., there were twenty new millionaires in the world.

Although it was only the first weekend in April, an early blast of warm air inspired the club to hang Japanese lanterns over the patio and serve the drinks and h'or douvers outside. After another long New England winter the assembling crowd was more than happy to shed their heavy overcoats and show off their spring fashions. The early arrivals had already made themselves comfortable around several of the dozen wrought-iron tables, from where they scrutinized the mix of casually well-dressed couples exiting onto the patio, noting who needed to shed some pounds after their winter-long hibernation, or whose hair color was noticeably darker since last exposed to inspection. Their wives were no kinder.

After walking around from the back of the building where they had parked, Jonathan and Mallory finally made it inside the club. Mallory looked great, as always.

Whether it was his lack of competitiveness or his deep-rooted respect for women, Jonathan was not the type of man to brag about his wife's body. But as she strolled through the main reception hall towards the patio, he couldn't help but feel an unabashed sense of pride. She had a great body, for sure, but plenty of women her age had great bodies. Few knew how to carry that body with such easy confidence as Mallory. That was what made her so beautiful. *I can't believe that this is my wife*, he found himself thinking gratefully.

That last thought was shared by more than a few of the people who watched Jon and Mallory exit to the patio. Jonathan had just taken her hand (more out of fear of crowds than affection for his wife), and the image of this poised woman strolling onto the patio with a man only the most generous observer would consider her physical equal caused a woman at a nearby table to blurt out "How did he ever get her?"

Since Jonathan's shoulders, already slumped, didn't fall any further and his gait, already something of an amble, didn't slow, it wasn't clear if he hadn't heard the crude remark or if he had and just chose not to react. But the sudden surge of confidence in the already commanding Mallory, a strut visible from the far edges of the patio—hell, a strut visible from space, made it clear that she had. And that she enjoyed it.

Now it was time to mingle. Ahhh, another anthropological study.

Mallory, who had always been a "social butterfly" as far back as high school, worked the room like a cash-starved politician seeking donations, using dimly recalled chance meetings at other functions to ingratiate herself with the people on the patio. (Funny how her husband's exact position in the company was never precisely described.) She was in her element and having a ball.

Despite his lack of interest in all things corporate, Jonathan wasn't doing too badly,

either. From his many years in the business he had made many acquaintances and even a few friends among the club's members, all of whom knew of his devotion to the Red Sox. So Jon was off in a corner playing guru, answering questions, and delivering his opinions on how many games they could win or when the new ballpark would ever get built. Jon was now speaking with Mark, one of Tennis.net's top salesmen before he defected to another 'Dot com' the previous year.

"As a matter of fact I got two for the game with Toronto at the end of the month," Jon was saying. "That'll be my first game of the year."

Mark nodded. "You get to a lot of games, don't you?"

"Never as many as I'd like to."

Mark laughed. "I remember your cube walls, Jon. As I recall before the playoffs two years ago you put green construction paper on one side of your cube and called it the Green Monster. So 82 games wouldn't be enough for you."

Jon laughed. "You're right about that. There's at least 8 playoff games and the World Series to go to."

"Hey, listen, Jon," Mark said, very seriously. The sudden shift in tone took Jon by surprise. "I heard what happened over at Tennis, you know, with Brian and the office and everything, and I want you to know I think you got a raw deal. I mean Brian's an okay guy and all that—"

"Mark, how are you, you son-of-a-bitch," Jonathan heard a stranger say as a hand pounded the salesman's back. Mark, looking slightly annoyed, turned around quickly to see his attacker.

"Steven!" he said with a smile. "What are you trying to do, give me a heart attack?"

The other man laughed. "What's the matter? Not tough enough anymore?"

“So howya doing?”

“Doin’ great, Mark, doing great.”

Mark looked at Jon as he said “Steve, old man, have you met Jonathan?”

“Don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure,” the stranger replied as he extended his hand.

“Steven is with The Cambridge Group,” Mark said as Jon and Steve shook hands.

“You’re Director of Marketing, right?”

“Director? You haven’t heard? It’s Vice President now.”

“No! When did this happen?”

“Last month.”

“Well, congratulations,” Mark said, as he grabbed Steve’s hand away from Jonathan and pumped it vigorously.

“Yea, I was beginning to wonder if it was ever going to happen. You know I was stuck in that Director’s job for almost three years.”

“Three whole years, huh?” Mark replied, sympathetically.

“You know how it is. If you’re in one job for longer than that you can forget about promotion. It’s like the big boys just can’t see you doing anything else. Before you know it, they’re naming your cubicle in your honor.” Steve took a breath and turned to Jon. “So, Jon, what do you do?”

At that moment, after just having their professional life eulogized with such laser-guided precision, anyone else would have wished themselves dead. But Jonathan wasn’t feeling sorry for himself, but for Mark. And that pretty much sums up Jon.

Eighty-two times a year, for several hours before and after each home game, the Fenway neighborhood of Boston is transformed from an easy mix of businesses and residences into a service area for a major league ballpark. But shed no tears for the locals. Bars that in the winter sold dollar drafts now serve “Red Sox Specials” for three and a half bucks. Parking lots that charged five dollars for a space now command twenty. Entrepreneurs hawk knock-off T-shirts and baseball caps while scalpers troll the masses for those poor, unticketed souls seeking seats inside the vaunted cathedral on Yawkey Way.

Yawkey Way, one of the streets next to Fenway Park, was named for Tom Yawkey, the beloved owner of the Red Sox until his death in 1975. It is ground zero before a Red Sox game, since it is through the gates on this street that almost everyone, except those headed for the grandstands in centerfield, has to funnel through to get into the park. Fenway Park may be the smallest in the major leagues, but that’s still 33,000 people converging into one place. And Jonathan loved it. He really did. The sweet smell of the sausages and the onions and the peppers grilling out in the open. The satisfying odor of roasting peanuts. And the sounds! The sausage and peanut vendors calling out their wares, or the scalpers subtly inquiring if you had two to sell or needed two to buy (New England entrepreneur-ship at its finest). Streaming past them were all of these fans coming here for one reason, to enjoy themselves at a major league baseball game, in the true spirit of sportsmanship.

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about!” a middle-aged man screamed at a male companion. “The man was a major-leaguer for Chris' sakes. It was a simple freakin' ground ball!”

“You can’t even bend down to pick up a dime that’s laying there on the sidewalk, so

how can you say what a major league ballplayer should or should not have done,” Jonathan heard the other man reply before their argument faded and another, equally acrimonious debate became audible.

“Maybe if you went to as many games as I did you wouldn’t be so quick to try to save a hundred year old building,” he heard an older man yelling at a familiar face—the same SAVE FENWAY fanatic that had accosted him on Lansdowne Street last month. As Jonathan passed them, the older man caught Jonathan’s eye and gave him a “can you believe it?” look. Jonathan just smiled politely and continued to move towards the park, the argument slowly fading into the general noise of the crowd.

As he moved closer to the entrance, the conversations and come-ons faded in and out of his ears. Jon smiled again. It was a beautiful afternoon in late April and his Red Sox were on a winning streak and he was here to pay homage. He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath and held it tightly. Boy, something smelled good, he realized. Then he opened his eyes and stopped dead in his tracks.

It was another sausage stand. He knew he should keep walking, but the aroma of those peppers and onions mixed with the grilled meat was getting to him big time. His hand involuntarily went to his stomach and the slight paunch that had somehow affixed itself to his body over the long winter. (All right, it had been there for a few winters. And summers. Can we move on?) Now an equally acrimonious debate was taking place in his brain over the fate of that perfectly singed sausage before him on the grill. He could almost imagine a little Jonathan in a red devil’s costume and horns on one shoulder and another miniature Jonathan on the other with a halo and wings arguing over what he should do.

It was no contest. Just before he pushed the little Jonathan in the angel’s costume

off his shoulder, the little Jonathan in the devil's costume said something rude about rice cakes and what the angel could do with them.

"Could I have that one, please," Jonathan said to the vendor, pointing to the magnificent specimen of sausage at the end of the grill. The vendor nodded and began preparing his order and Jonathan reached into his trousers for his money. That's when the strange feeling first struck him. No, it wasn't guilt over the sausage. It was something different, like the feeling one gets watching a glass teeter at the edge of a table but you don't move, you just stand there watching it rock back and forth, knowing that you should do something before it's too late, but then it is too late and the glass crashes to the floor. That feeling when you know something is going to happen but there is nothing you can do to affect the outcome. It was very unsettling. Jonathan wondered if anyone else was similarly affected, but a sweep of the crowd showed that he was alone in his angst. *How strange that I should be experiencing it here, at Fenway Park*, he thought.

"Hey buddy! Yo!"

The shouting was from the vendor, who looked very annoyed. "You want this, or what?" he asked, holding out the sandwich. "I got other customers, you know?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, I do," Jonathan managed to mumble as he handed over some money to the man, who, in exchange, planted the wrapped sausage sandwich into his hand.

"Hot fresh sausage, right here, folks. Best in Boston, right here. Hot sausage. Come on. Get it here," the vendor began to yell, as Jonathan moved slowly away from the stand, the strange feeling still nagging him. He was now just a few feet away from the entrance to the park, but as exciting as the moment of his first game of the year should have been, Jonathan couldn't bring himself to step inside. He looked back at the

crowd as it laughed and argued and ate its way towards the gate. The sight comforted him, and the tightness in his abdomen slowly loosened. Jonathan lunged happily into the sandwich as he allowed the crowd to sweep him into the ball park.

At that exact moment Jonathan was entering his hallowed Fenway, Mallory was back at their house engaged in a spring cleaning. This twice-annual exercise in grime exorcism included a thorough cleaning of those very windows that caused so much anguish in her life. They were old—but not Fenway old with history and charm and memories of great moments, but old in the rotting, should-have-been-replaced-years-ago kind. Lead weights attached to heavy cords were supposed to make lifting the panes easy, but most of the cords had broken and a hundred summers and winters and the expansion and contraction of the frames had frozen some of those windows in place.

Nevertheless Mallory knew they had to be cleaned. She also knew that the task was left completely up to her. So there she was, wrestling with the large window in the living room and thinking very dark thoughts about Jonathan, whom she was imagining at the game, having the time of his life. *Probably bought a sausage, too*, she thought grimly as she planted her feet firmly on the ground and pushed upward on the window.

Of course, Jonathan was enjoying himself. The Red Sox were on an early season roll—they were in first place with the best record in the American League and on this day looked like they were on the way to another victory. The bases were loaded and the Sox had their latest sensation at the plate, a Cuban rookie who had defected in the middle of an exhibition game against Major League all-stars. (International incidents aside, it really was quite funny when, after rounding the bases following a home run the Cuban ran not into his dugout but into the American's bus where he sat down and demanded asylum. Unlike Elian Gonzalez, this young Cuban could hit, and unlike Elian, he was allowed to

stay.) At the very moment Mallory was straining to open the living room window, the now ex-Cuban was swinging and connecting on a powerful blast to left field. Jonathan and the rest of the 33,000 fans screamed with joy as the home run sailed over the left field wall.

That was the precise moment that the living room window at the Bailey's home gave way. Mallory, who had been exerting all the force her size six body could generate, was powerless to stop the onslaught of physics. With nothing holding Mallory back, her head and upper body flew backwards, her grip on the window released, and she was flung to the ground, where she lay, staring malevolently at the tired, useless, old window. Back at Fenway, Jonathan was giving high-fives to the fans around him, strangers but a few innings ago but now all as close as people could get, at least as long as the Sox had the lead.

"Well, if you weren't at Fenway Park today you missed a beauty as the Sox won their first game of the home stand by beating the Toronto Blue Jays on the awesome power of Cuban defector—"

Jonathan, who had just pulled into his driveway, shut off the radio and turned off the car's engine. In front of him, in the fading April afternoon light, was his house. He smiled when he thought of the real estate agent who crashed their house last year to do a "free assessment" of his property. She spent about a half-hour looking at their small, 96-year-old traditional cape. Then she declared with great certainty that with the raging real estate market the way it was, Jon and Mallory could easily get \$270,000 for their home. Wow. What would his old man have said to the fact that a member of the Balinsky

family owned a quarter-of-a-million-dollar house? What would all of grandpa's neighbors back on Joy Street would have said, he wondered?

He was still basking in the glow of imagined paternal approval when he noticed that there were no lights on in the house. He saw Mallory's car, which he assumed meant that she was home. So why were the lights off? Concerned, he exited the car walked to the front door of the house. "Mallory! Sweetie! I'm back," he called out as he entered the dark living room. "Mallory?"

"I'm here," he heard Mallory's soft, calm, voice say from the darkness.

"Oh, Mal, you should've been there," Jonathan said enthusiastically as he moved towards her." Martinez hit one that—"

It was just like in those really cool science fiction movies where the poor bastard walks into a room in which everyone in the audience knows only horror awaits, so you scream even though it's a movie and he won't hear you but you need to let out the pent-up emotion and tension you are feeling just as the awful, slimy thing comes out...

From the darkness, Jonathan never saw it coming.

CHAPTER 4.

First Pitch

Sitting in his cubicle the next morning, Jonathan tried, without much success, to focus on the spreadsheet that wavered and danced before him on the computer screen. He leaned back in his chair and massaged his eyes through his closed eyelids. The darkness behind his eyelids seemed to help his headache. *If only it were quieter*, he thought, as a thumping sound began to invade his consciousness. He opened his eyes and turned to the direction of the thumping and saw across the aisle, inside Brian's office, two men installing a thick maroon carpet in Brian's new office.

Jonathan knew that he should be feeling something more than just annoyance at the thumping of the hammers on carpet in the office Mallory contended should be his. That's what that fight was about last night, he told himself. Not about sticky windows, but about stuck careers. He looked again at the thick pile of the carpet and imagined how nice it must feel on a pair of tired feet. Nicer than the gray, industrial-grade, cardboard-thin covering that passed for carpeting here in Cubicle Land.

"Hey, why so glum? They won last night, didn't they?" Jon heard a voice say. He raised his eyes without moving his head and saw Phil standing at the entrance to his cubicle. He smiled back feebly.

From behind Phil came the banging of a hammer. He turned and glanced quickly towards the source—the office—and, assuming he had blundered into a personal moment for Jon, turned back with a sad expression. Jon had to smile. There was something funny and, come to think of it, touching in the concern that this relative stranger was showing him.

“You’re right Phil, they did win last night,” Jonathan said, happy to break the grim mood. “I guess I’m just getting psyched up for that first slump of the year.”

Phil smiled gratefully. “Typical Red Sox fan. Come on, they’re waiting for us at the agency.”

Jonathan smiled back and, in one fluid motion, grabbed his jacket and got up and out of his cubicle. “Great, let’s get there before all the good donuts are taken.”

“What’s a good donut?” Phil asked as he jogged to catch up to Jon, the thumping of carpet nails receding behind them.

“Anything with jelly in it.”

“And what’s a bad donut?”

“Anything that’s low fat.”

Phil laughed and nodded his head in agreement as they exited the building. They walked to the car, got in, and turned on the radio. Guy Wayland’s thick voice filled the interior of the small car.

“Yes, it was a good, win, but if you people think that this combination of rubber-armed pitchers, Swiss-cheese infielders, and puny-hitting outfielders has even a shot of competing against the Yankees or Seattle come the fall you are kidding yourselves. But why don’t we see of any of you Sox fans have a different opinion?”

Red Sox fans with an opinion? What were the odds that a Red Sox fan wouldn’t

have an opinion, especially after that insult on their team? At that moment, at the radio station, Guy Wayland, his chest a winter wonderland of powdered sugar having just shoved another pastry down his gullet, peered down to his console and saw every phone line into the studio screaming to be picked up. He motioned to his producer.

“Let’s take a call,” he said as he randomly punched one of the brightly lit buttons.

“Hello, caller, you’re on the Guy Wayland Show.”

“Wayland, you are such a jerk. Why don’t you go to New York with the rest of them Yankee bums?” he heard the surprisingly feminine voice say.

“Thank you, sweetheart. Nice to talk to you, too.”

“I just want you to know that I’ve been a Red Sox fan for twenty years now and as far as I’m concerned—”

“Twenty years?” Guy said as he gestured to his producer. “Then you must remember this sound.” Guy’s hand went down, the producer pushed a button, and suddenly the studio and airwaves were filled with an electronic sound effect that could best be described as a warped, bouncing, ping-pong ball. “Could it be? Wait a minute... it is! It’s the ball going through Bill Buckner’s legs again...”

Inside Jonathan’s car, Jonathan laughed as the frustrated caller hung up. A dial tone, mixed with the funny blooping sound and Guy’s laughter filled the car. It was more than Phil could stand, and he reached over to the dashboard and shut the radio off.

“Hey, why’d you do that?” Jonathan asked.

“How can you listen to that jerk? I can’t stand him and I’m not even a Red Sox fan!”

“I don’t know... because he’s funny?”

“Funny? The Buckner thing was what, 17 years ago? I mean how many times do

you have to be reminded that Bill Buckner cost the Red Sox the 1986 World Series when he let a ground ball go through his legs?”

“You can’t change the fact that it happened.”

“But move on, already,” Phil said with exasperation. “It’s April in 2003 and your team is in first place by a mile. Can’t you enjoy that? Jesus.” Phil sat back in his seat and folded his arms and shook his head. “You guys aren’t happy unless you have something to complain about, are you?”

Jonathan laughed. “Not at all. I wanna see them win. I’ve just learned not to get so upset when they don’t.”

“Because you expect that they won’t,” Phil asserted.

“I don’t expect anything.” Now Jon was beginning to feel a bit defensive.

“You do. All of you expect they’re gonna choke and almost seem satisfied when they do. You even have a name for it, don’t you. The Curse of the Bambino!”

“You mean that the Red Sox haven’t won a World Series since we sold Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees?”

“Not since, because. Come on admit it, you believe in this silly Curse, don’t you?”

“I do not!” Wow. He was yelling. Was he letting Phil get to him?

“You do,” said Phil, sensing a crack in the veneer. “You all do. And you know why? Because without the Curse you’d go insane. You know, when I was at my old job in Milwaukee and I’d come here on business trips and the Sox were in first place, everywhere I went I heard the same thing, ‘So how are they gonna blow it this year?’ And then when they did blow it everyone seemed... happy, for Christ sakes.”

“Oh, that’s crazy. Red Sox fans want to win as much as anybody else.

“Oh, really?” Phil replied as he turned the radio back on.

“...you want to believe that they can pull it off, that’s your business. But it’s only the end of April and lots of teams with wining records in April are watching the playoffs at home in October, so don’t come crying to me when they break your hearts again, Boston,” the mocking voice from the radio said as the blooping sound effect reverberated from inside the car’s dashboard.

Phil turned the radio off again and looked at Jonathan with all the curiosity he could muster. “So how is it this guy has the number one talk show in the city?”

“I’ll tell you why. Because we’re gluttons for punishment,” Mallory, getting a manicure, was saying at that exact moment to Francine, Debbie, and Mary Ellen. They were meeting, as they always did on Mondays, at Arlene’s Beauty Salon, a brightly lit, room lined with mirrors, crammed with sinks, hair dryers, and barber’s chairs located in a tiny strip mall in Reading. There, the four high school friends from Medford who had all married and moved to greener suburbs north of the city received various treatments from several young female staff members, whose high-school bodies they eyed with well-manicured jealousy. A radio, tuned to a local hip-hop station, blared from a corner of the room. The whole place reeked from a toxic combination of cigarette smoke, hair spray, and Chinese food from the restaurant next door.

“I always thought it was because our mothers taught us that this is the way life was supposed to be,” said Francine, who was getting her hair cut.

“This is the way life is supposed to be?” Mallory retorted. “Because if it—OW!”

“Sorry,” said the girl with orange hair and nose ring seated across a small table.

Mallory wasn’t sure what made her more angry, the pain from the manicure or the

girl's size 4 waist. Both were pretty painful. "That hurt."

"Like, I said I was sorry. Your hands are like, really messed up."

"It's those God-damned windows," Mallory said as she examined her fingers.

"Why don't you buy new ones if the old ones are broken?" Mallory heard Mary Ellen ask. Hearing Mary Ellen still acting the part of the chipper cheerleader only annoyed Mallory, and she eyed her malevolently. Didn't Mary Ellen understand this was not about finding an answer to her problems, but about venting her frustration and letting her friends heap sympathy on her beleaguered soul?

Mallory took a deep breath before patiently explaining her situation to her riveted audience as she laid her hands back across the manicurist's table. "Jonathan says we can't afford them and that he can fix them by himself—Ow!"

"Sorry."

"I don't know how you put up with him," Francine offered. Francine was the de facto leader of the group and had been since junior high. That was because she was the first girl to get her period, the first girl to need a bra, and the first girl to discover boys—or, more accurately, the girl the boys discovered. So, as she made her way through each one of these rites of passage, it was natural that the girls look to her first for adolescent scouting reports, for which she was granted leadership status. And though everyone in the group had long "caught up" in the period, bra, and boy departments, she still held leadership status. Old habits die hard.

"You could have had anyone at Taft High, you know," Francine declared.

That remark was followed by a chorus of agreement from the other girls.

"Sure, anyone the cheerleaders left over," Mallory responded. The other girls giggled at the remark, and she continued. "But by the time I got to college I had matured,

you know? So instead of looking for a body and some fun I looked for a brain and some security, right? Someone with like a business degree who was gonna be a vice-president or something—Ow!”

“Like, sorry.”

Mallory looked down at her chipped and cracked nails and felt a lump in her throat. Then, sadly, without looking up, she croaked “Instead, I end up fighting windows with a guy who works in a cubicle.”

This pathetic assessment from this usually self-assured woman took the room by surprise. Francine broke the awful silence. “Mallory... we had no idea it was that bad.”

Debbie chimed in. “It sounds like you have every right to complain. No one should have to settle, right girls?”

There was a chorus of assent, interrupted by that chipper Mary Ellen again. “I still say you tell him how you feel. How you really feel.”

“He knows, believe me,” Mallory shot back, hoping to herself that maybe that for once ‘Miss Perky’ would just shut up.

“Well, I give you a lot of credit for sticking with him for all these years,” Francine said as she looked around the room.

Debbie caught on. “Yea, Tammy Wynette’s got nothing on you, girl,” and she began to sing. “Stand by your man...” at which point Francine and Mary Ellen giggled and then joined in “...Give him two arms to cling to...”

Soon everybody in the shop—even the high school girls with their obnoxiously great bodies who had no idea who Tammy Wynette was—were trying to remember the words as they laughed and sang “...and something warm to come to, when nights are cold and lonely...”

Jonathan and Phil had returned from their off-site meeting later that day, and were making their way down the aisle to their cubicles, when they saw Gloria approaching them. An older woman with fine white hair and years of experience behind a desk that she wore on her hips, Gloria seemed to be out of place in an office dominated by twenty- and thirty-somethings. But unlike the younger women who bristled when anyone called them a secretary, Gloria could actually type and take shorthand and disdained the euphemism ‘administrator.’ She loved being the office version of M*A*S*H’s ‘Radar’ O’Reilly—the person everyone went to for the impossible requests because she could get them filled.

“Jon,” she said softly with the discretion she felt the moment deserved. “Brian wants to see you.”

“Thanks,” Jon said, even though he saw the look that Gloria gave Phil, as if she had just said “Good news, Jon, they’ve fixed the problem with the guillotine.” Gloria and Phil watched as he walked to Brian’s office, knocked on the door, and entered.

In the old days they had an expression for when a boss would get angry at one of his or her employees. How ironic that it was Brian who was, at that moment, ‘calling Jon on the carpet.’ That nice, thick, maroon carpet they had finished installing in Brian’s new office just a few days ago...

Behind him were thousands of miles of highway and back roads. In front of him was his first destination, the door of an unmarked shop in downtown Salem. Had he not

been looking so carefully, he would have walked right by it. But there it was, just as it had been described to him, crammed between a sub shop and a chain drug store. A simple, unremarkable door.

He opened it and caught a lung-full of sweet-smelling dust that billowed softly out of the door. Even with the blazing sun behind him, he could see barely five feet inside the store.

“Please shut the door,” he heard a woman’s voice say. “You’re letting the fresh air in.”

If that was a joke, then it was pretty funny. If it wasn’t..., well, he didn’t want to think about that. Unlike the tourists who flocked to the so-called “witch capital,” he hadn’t come all this way to Salem to be spooked. He obediently shut the door and squeezed his way down an aisle packed with all manner of strange looking and smelling powders and liquids, until he almost bumped into a counter at the far end of the shop. From behind it, an old woman looked at him with a sad, but knowing face. He was about to speak when she reached behind into the darkness and placed a small vial on top of the counter.

The bottle itself was pretty unremarkable. It looked to be made of clear glass, was about four inches tall, and was cylindrical except for a slight bulge around the middle. It looked to him like something cheap perfume might come in. But the stuff inside sure wasn’t perfume—that much was obvious. Perfume wasn’t green. And perfume didn’t glow or give off heat, did it?

The old woman said nothing to him about the item or how to use it or even how much it cost. She didn’t need to. Instinctively, he reached into his pants pocket and placed a twenty dollar bill on the counter, picked up the vial, and put it in his jacket.

Then he turned around and squeezed back through the crowded, dimly lit aisle until he was at the door, where he felt the cool, fresh breeze from outside the shop.

“Be careful what you wish for,” he heard from the darkness behind him. “You might get it.”

If that was a joke, he thought, then it was pretty funny. But if it wasn't....

It was night, now, and Jonathan was laying in bed watching the 11 o'clock news. Years ago, when he and Mallory first got married, they didn't have a television set in the bedroom. It was a point of minor contention, at first. Mallory had grown up falling asleep to the late news or talk show, but Jonathan hated the very thought of a television in the bedroom. To him it was an intrusion into his sleeping space, and argued successfully to banish the box to their living room. Of course, it was an easy argument for Jonathan to win twelve years ago, when they were newlyweds. But slowly, over the years, their 'free' time in the bedroom had increased. In their fifth year of marriage Mallory had gotten sick and Jonathan had moved the TV into the bedroom so she wouldn't get bored during her recuperation. Without any argument or discussion, the television set remained long after her illness had departed.

Jonathan came to appreciate the television in their bedroom. It turned out to be very useful, for it eliminated the effort required to sustain a viable conversation. Except for nights such as this one. Mallory was sitting at her vanity preparing for bed with her ritual application of variously scented creams and oils, while Jonathan lay in the bed watching—no surprise—the Red Sox game. It was a great game, too, with the Red Sox and Chicago White Sox trading the lead three times already. Now it was the bottom of

the ninth and the Red Sox were down by a run but with two men on they still had a chance with only one out.

“So you just sat there?” Mallory asked.

Ignoring her was not an option. He considered raising the volume of the TV and pretending he didn't hear her but thought better of it. Turning his head towards her he said, “What was I supposed to do? Walk out?”

“You could have told him he was wrong.”

“But he thinks he's right.”

“But you said that he wasn't.”

“That doesn't matter. He's the boss, and if he thinks he's right, that means he's right.”

She grunted.

“It doesn't mean anything,” he replied. “He was just blowing off a little steam.”

“And you're so noble for letting him do it to you.”

“Mal, please, I'm not being noble. Just practical.”

Jonathan watched her open another container of some strangely colored cream and begin applying it to her face. If not mollified, he thought she was at least willing to let the discussion drop. He lay back on the bed and raised the volume of the television, happy that there was still some game left to enjoy.

“You know everyone's talking about it,” he heard her say from behind a gloopy mask of purple cream.

He sighed. “About what?”

“About you getting chewed out by someone who has less time at the company than you do,” the purple mask was saying.

Now what was she talking about? “Everybody? Who’s everybody?” he demanded.

The purple mask smiled, and Jonathan suddenly realized that he had made a tactical error by displaying something more than casual interest. But it was too late to save himself or his ballgame. He sighed again as he lowered the volume of the television.

“Mary Ellen,” he heard her say. “She says that Kenny told her all about it.”

Jonathan raised his eyes. “That’s everybody, all right.”

“He is your friend.”

No star debater, Jonathan nevertheless saw the opening he needed to put this incident in its proper place. “And Kenny, just like everyone else in the office, knows it’s no big deal. He’s been called on the carpet his share of times too, believe you me.”

The eyes of the purple mask widened appreciably. “Really? When? What happened?”

Oh, no, Jonathan thought. *No way am I going to let this happen. Mallory will tell Mary Ellen who’ll tell Kenny and then I’m caught in the middle of their fight, too.* He looked sideways at the TV and saw the Red Sox were still threatening with a man at bat. He was desperate to end the inquisition, but what could he possibly say to make her drop the subject? “Mallory, it’s just a little corporate ass-kicking. They happen all the time. Stop making it into such a big deal.”

“Maybe if you’d made a bigger deal of it and fought back you’d be giving the ass-kicking instead of getting it all the time.” Satisfied she had placed the proper coda on the whole affair, Mallory turned back to the mirror.

Once more, Jonathan sighed. In the mirror and through the purple goo, he could see the smug look on her face and frowned. It’s not that he hated losing arguments, he hated having them to begin with. They took up time and energy and never seemed to solve

anything. All they did was make him miss the one thing on TV that was worth having that stupid box in the bedroom for. Speaking of which...

Jonathan looked over at the television set just in time to see a fly ball almost leave the ballpark but drop harmlessly into the glove of the Chicago centerfielder. But the runner on third base had tagged up and was racing for home plate with all his might in a desperate race with the ball being thrown to the Chicago catcher. Which would get there first, the runner or the ball?

The answer should not have been the runner who had been on second base. But somehow he had almost overtaken the runner who had been on third, and they were now so close together as they both ran for home plate that it looked like a relay race just before the baton gets passed between runners. Jonathan watched with horror as the second runner clipped the heels of the first and both tumbled horribly down the third base line as the ball from centerfield landed squarely in the glove of the catcher, who positioned himself over home plate to apply the tag.

It would be a long wait. A heap that was both Red Sox runners had skidded to a stop about five feet from the plate.

The silence from the television was amazing. The crowd, which only seconds ago was screaming with its collective might, was now silent. Nothing on the field or in the stands was moving, until a voice from the Chicago dugout could be heard over the television screaming "Tag him, tag him!" This jolted the catcher into action. He walked over to the heap touched his glove onto a part of both uniforms—he would later tell reporters 'I couldn't figure out which one was which so I tagged 'em both just to be sure.' Thus ended the rally, the game, the winning streak, and sole possession of first place.

Jimmy O'Hara was a card-carrying member of the iron workers union and, if asked, could point to all the buildings in Boston whose steel frames he had taken a part in erecting. The 67-year-old South Boston native was also proud to say he was a life-long regular at Mass at St. Augustine's and a Red Sox fan. He liked to joke that the Union, the Church, and the Sox were "Southie's own version of the Holy Trinity." So, at the precise moment that those two base runners were extricating themselves from their crash site just feet from home plate, Jimmy was where he always was on a night a Red Sox game was on television—at the end of the bar nearest to the television set that hung in Amrine's Tavern on Broadway in South Boston.

"God-damn it. Can you believe that shit? God-damn bums is all they are. Nottin' but God-damned overpaid bums, for Chris-sakes."

"Take it easy, Jimmy," a voice from the dark, smoke-filled bar said. "It's just a baseball game."

Jimmy's eyes still hadn't left the television screen. "They're gonna do it again, ya know" he said to no one in particular. "They're gonna do it again."

"It's still early in the season, Jimmy, why don't you give 'em a chance?" another voice from the darkness offered.

"Yea, there's still plenty of time for them to tank," said another man, which caused everyone within earshot to laugh. Everyone except Jimmy, who just stared at the television muttering obscenities that he knew he was going to have to atone for come Sunday morning.

"God-damn overpaid bums..."

It was the beginning of May and Boston was still shaking off another New England winter. April is truly 'the cruelest month,' in New England because Mother nature serves up such a brief portion of Spring that little time passes between the melting of the last mound of winter snow and the first blast of hot, sticky, humid, summer air. Maybe it's payback for having such glorious autumns.

He drove his car slowly and aimlessly down Boylston Street through the park known as the Fens, which is a large swath of green which separates Boston's downtown and the Fenway Park neighborhood. There was a lot on his mind and he was in no rush. It had been years since he had called Boston home and he marveled at how much a city could change so much yet remain the same. Downtown, tall buildings seemed to be sprouting up everywhere, yet at street level the city still possessed a proud, red brick charm. He had always liked that about Boston.

"...and last night's loss drops the Sox into third place, just a week after they had sole possession of first," he heard a deep-throated announcer on the radio say without emotion.

"So it's ball between the legs time!" he heard Guy Wayland say.

"I didn't say that, Guy, after all it's still early in the season and—"

"I said it's ball through the legs time!" and with that, the electronic bouncing ball sound effect that Guy used with such relish permeated the car. "Boing! Boing! Boing!" Guy yelled with glee. "Now let's open up the phone lines and see how many members of the Red Sox nation want to defect!"

He shut the radio off and grabbed the steering wheel as if he were floating in a cold sea and it were a life preserver. Then, ashamed for letting the talk show host get to him,

he released his grip on the wheel and slid one hand into the pocket of his jacket, feeling the shape of the bottle the curve of a small bottle. What was it one of the Kennedys once said, "If not now, when? If not us, who?" He realized that somewhere deep inside him a switch had been thrown. He knew that the time was now and he was the one who had to do it. Perhaps it was that no one else could, for no one else alive had so much riding on the resolution.

CHAPTER 5.

Rain Delay

Now he was standing again at the corner of Brookline Avenue and Yawkey Way. He looked up at the old ballpark and then down at the street as thousands of the faithful parishioners preparing to enter the shrine, all oblivious to the dark rain-filled clouds that hung menacingly over the city. He was suddenly aware of the weight of the bottle in his pocket, and instinctively reached inside to feel the warmth of the strange liquid's glow. In his other pocket was a ticket to the game.

“So it really doesn't bother you?” Kenny asked Jonathan. They were sitting along the third base line in Fenway Park, about twelve rows up from the field. A member of the Texas Rangers, that night's opponent, had just grounded into a double play for the last two outs of the inning, and there was a break in the action while the teams changed places in the field.

“You sound like my wife,” Jon replied, smiling. “Why should it?”

“He's been there five years less than you have, for one thing.”

“Do you know how many guys have sat in that office over the past eight years?”

Gotta be four, at least. That's not an office, it's a waiting room."

Kenny laughed and then thought about it for a few moments. Then he brightened.

"More dough."

"More work."

"Chance to move up."

"Chance to get moved out. It's like standing up in a foxhole during a fire fight.

You're just giving the enemy a chance to pick you off."

"You oughta write a book. Call it 'The Secret to My Success.'"

"I could write a book. It's called 'How Not to Get an Ulcer.'"

Kenny couldn't decide if Jon was trying to be funny, but the first Red Sox batter of the inning was at the plate, which pretty much ended the conversation. There was certainly no denying that Jon seemed to know what he wanted out of life. The fact that success was not one of them shouldn't be any skin off his nose, Kenny thought. He returned his attention to the game when out of the corner of his eye he saw the strangest expression on Jonathan's face. It seemed so corny even to think it but his friend really looked like he had seen a ghost. No, scratch that. He looked as if he was seeing a ghost *at that moment*.

"Jon, are you okay?" Kenny asked. He didn't respond. "Jon, what is it?"

"Nothing," came the halting reply. I just... I don't know, I thought I... never mind."

"You had me worried there for a sec—" There was a crack of a bat and the crowd jumped cheering onto its feet. Kenny and Jon did, too, as the Red Sox runner reached second base. As they sat down Kenny turned to Jon and asked "Everything all right, now?"

“Yea, sure,” Jon replied, although it didn’t sound like he was sure. That strange chill had returned, yet as much as he wanted to tell Kenny about it, he knew it was something he had to keep to himself. Paranoia in the workplace is one thing, but at a ballpark it was downright creepy. Jon shook his head in an attempt to clear his head, and found the physical activity helped... a little.

He returned his attention to the game, which was going very well for the Red Sox. Another hit had advanced the runner to third base, which meant they had a man only 90 feet away from scoring the game’s first run. As the next Red Sox batter stepped up to the plate and the pitcher and catcher exchanged signs the tension in the crowd began to grow in anticipation. But three thousand feet above them all the clouds suddenly cracked open, releasing a torrential downpour on the ballpark.

Kenny and Jonathan’s seats were close to the field and great for watching the game, but they were far too forward from the upper deck to prevent them from getting wet. As the rain drops got larger and more frequent Kenny and the other fans got up and began heading towards the covered part of the stands. Jon didn’t budge.

“Hey, buddy, it’s raining. You wanna get wet?” Kenny asked.

Jon looked up at Kenny and with that, a large drop of rain landed unceremoniously in his left eye. Jon lowered his head, blinked, and looked around him at the ball park and at Kenny and at the rain. “Nahhh,” he said waving his arm. “It’s not raining that hard. Besides, they’re still playing and—”

CRACK! A large bolt of lighting exploded over the ball park. Like sharp knife, it seemed to cut open the clouds, which now burst forth with an even more terrifying, torrential downpour. Jonathan and Kenny could barely see as they and thousands of other fans scrambled over their seats and up the aisles towards the shelter of the upper

deck. The rain was coming down so hard and so fast now that even before the last player could race back into their dugout, a muddy river had cut across between the pitcher's mound and home plate. Huddled under the upper deck with several thousand other fans, Jonathan and Kenny watched the field disappear under the water.

“You're right,” Kenny said as he squeezed a cup of water from his shirt. “It's not raining hard at all...”

They waited under the upper deck for about a half an hour later, until the public address system clicked to life. “Ladies and gentlemen,” the man's voice echoed through the park, “the Boston Red Sox regret that tonight's game is being canceled due to the inclement weather.” The announcement was greeted with a mixture of groans and cheers from the hardy hundreds who had decided to tough it out. “Please follow the instructions of the ushers and exit the ballpark in an orderly manner,” the voice commanded. “The Red Sox thank you for coming out tonight and we look forward to seeing you again.”

The crowd, Kenny and Jon included, made it's way up the aisles of the old ballpark as the P.A. system blared “Singing in the Rain.” Some people laughed and some even started singing along. Others just groaned at the sheer corniness.

As he reached the exit ramp that would take him out of the park, Jonathan turned for one last look. That's when he felt it again. That damned chill.

“Come on, buddy, let's go!” he heard the usher yelled as the crowd began to back up behind him.

Chagrined, Jonathan felt Kenny tugging at his sleeve. “Come on, man, wake up,” Kenny said as he dragged him by the arm down the aisle and away from the stands.

“Let’s get home before the Charles River overflows and we have to swim home!”

Several hours later the rain had stopped but a dark gray carpet of clouds still hung over the city. As is custom after two in the morning in this quaint city that wants so desperately to be cosmopolitan, the nightclubs and restaurants and bars had all closed and the trains had stopped running for the night. Inside rain-soaked Fenway Park, the cleaning crews had finished cleaning the stands of cups, wrappers, and discarded programs from the rained-out game while the grounds crew, fighting the decay of over 90 years of use, once again worked its magic to preserve the precious field.

The ushers and security guards, having finished their last sweep of the stands and satisfied themselves that they had gotten the last patron out, turned off the lights which threw the park into eerie darkness. High above the city, straggling bolts of lightning occasionally blazed into brief existence, casting giant monster-like shadows of the light towers onto the field and left field wall.

Nobody saw the man with the slight limp make his way from his hiding place in back of the stands near the third base side. Nobody saw him gingerly hop over the short fence that separates the fans from the perimeter of the field, either. Nobody saw how he stopped to catch his breath, shuddering as a flash of lightning caused the left field wall to light up like a giant, green neon sign.

He walked slowly towards the wall, hugging the stands in an effort to keep from being seen—

“Hey, you!”

Damn. It was a security guard. He thought they had all gone inside.

“Stop right where you are!” the guard called out.

“What’s going on?” he heard another voice ask.

“Someone’s in the park.”

“Where?”

“Over by the third base side.”

Two flashlights suddenly clicked to life, and he saw the two beams racing towards him. He looked up in the darkness at the giant wall and knew he would have only one chance.

“He’s heading for the wall!”

They were right. He had bolted towards left field, not as fast as he would have liked, but with a little luck he wouldn’t slip on the wet grass and he would have just enough time to—the bottle! In which pocket had he put the bottle? He cursed himself as his hands ran across his jacket feeling for the bulge of the – ah, there it was. He reached down into the pocket and pulled out the precious vial, the wall looming in front of him larger and larger with each painful step. Behind him, he could hear the squishy footsteps of his pursuers getting closer by the second.

“He’s almost at the wall, get ready to grab him,” he heard one of the guards yell.

With no time to wonder exactly how he knew what to do, he pulled the bottle out of his pocket, its contents casting a greenish glow inside his clenched hand. Now, just ten feet away from the wall and the guard so close he could hear the man’s breathing, he flung the bottle with all his might against it, just as his legs gave way under the force of a severe tackling. Ahead of him, he could hear the crashing of glass against the ancient

wooden wall.

“Got you, you son-of-a—”

With his face flattened against the soggy outfield, he couldn't see why the guard had stopped in mid-sentence. But he did hear one of the other guard's voices.

“Jesus,” was all he heard.

There was something truly chilling about the way the guard had said that name. Then he realized the pressure on his legs had gone, that the guard who tackled him had stood up. Surely the others would have grabbed him and hand-cuffed him by now. Why not?

He lifted his head and saw why not. “Jesus,” he said out loud.

In front of them, the giant wall was filling up with... how could you describe it? With sparks, he guessed. These weren't regular, electrical sparks, though. These looked like they were alive. And multiplying rapidly by the looks of it, slowly filling up the wall with even more sparks that moved towards the top of the giant wall.

From where he lay on the ground, he could see the guards frozen in awe of this spectacular sight. It suddenly dawned him that his chance for escape had arrived. Getting onto all fours he picked himself off the wet grass and started to crawl backwards away from the wall, which was almost completely covered with the dancing sparks. They had just about reached the very top of the wall when he stood up, hoping to run as fast as he could to the stands, from where he could make good his escape from the park.

That's when one of the guards turned around and saw him.

“Hey! He's getting away!”

He had taken a deep breath in preparation for a painful dash to the stands, and at the sound of the guard's voice turned his head to look back onto the field. That was just as

the sparks reached the top of the wall. At that precise moment, a huge bolt of lightning pierced the black sky and struck the top of one of the light towers mounted on the wall. He knew it was impossible, but he swore that he could follow the path of the lightning as the electricity traveled down the tower, where it met the sea of sparks on the wall.

He had a buddy who served in the Navy during Vietnam who had been assigned to ordinance duty on one of those big destroyers. His friend used to say it wasn't the sound of the guns that bothered him but the concussion of air as the shell left the barrel of the cannon. How strange that it would be at three in the morning in left field of Fenway Park that he would finally understand what his friend had been talking about, for at that moment a huge mass of moving air lunged off the wall and knocked everyone to the ground.

He lay there on his back in the soggy turf, trying to catch his breath, and he could hear the three guards trying to do the same. As foggy and confused as he was at that moment, he realized that another brief window of opportunity for escape had opened again, and he staggered to his feet, fully intending to head for the stands. That's when a feeling of guilt overwhelmed him. He hated when that happened. He turned back to make sure that the guards were all right, and was pleased to see them all slowly rising from the ground. Then he realized their consciousness meant his own jeopardy, and he quickly turned and hobbled down the third base line, hopped the fence, and made good his escape from Fenway Park before they realized he had gone.

Unlike it's tabloid competitor, the *Boston Herald*, the *Boston Globe* usually eschews clever front page headlines. This morning, however, the circumstances were too bizarre

to resist. ‘STRIKE ONE,’ read the banner across the paper which lay on Jonathan’s kitchen table. Across the room, sitting on the refrigerator, was a small television that was tuned to ESPN, the all-sports cable station. Jonathan sat at the table, eating breakfast, watching a program called SPORTSCENTER, which recapped the sports events from the previous evening. Mallory entered the kitchen and exchanged terse ‘good mornings’ with Jonathan before preparing herself a small breakfast of toast and coffee.

“Well this just might be the jolt the fourth place Boston Red Sox are looking for,” the announcer on the TV was saying. “Last night the light tower over the fabled left field wall—the Green Monster—was struck by lightning after the game had been called off due to rain. Three security guards who were on the field at the time were taken to an area hospital complaining of headaches. All were later released and are said to be doing fine. A report that they were on the field chasing an intruder has not been confirmed. We’ll be back with more electric SPORTSCENTER after this...”

Jonathan picked up the remote control and lowered the volume on the TV before turning to Mallory. “How about that, huh?” he said like a little boy who just seen the circus drive by his house. “You know Kenny and I couldn’t have been seated more than fifty feet from the Wall. I mean of all the games to have tickets for! Man, I can’t believe the old ballpark didn’t fall down or burn or something. Can you imagine that?”

It took Jonathan a few seconds to realize that he was talking to air, because Mallory had already left the kitchen. He felt a brief moment of self-consciousness, which quickly gave way to resignation, which manifested itself in a sad sigh. He went back to his cereal and juice, but not before sighing one more time.

“Without even trying, every day I learn something,” Jonathan was saying to Marie and Phil as they sat in the cafeteria eating lunch. It was two days after the lighting had struck the Fenway Park wall, and the three co-workers, having run out of things to say about it, had moved on to more cerebral dialog. Cerebral, of course, being a relative term. “Not the crap they were shoving down our throats in school like who was James K. Polk or what’s the atomic weight of Carbon, but important stuff. Like how to hammer a nail without splitting the wood. Exactly how fast can I go through the toll booth so I can drop my money in the basket and make it past the gate without the alarm going off. How to talk to a beautiful woman without her realizing you’re only talking to her because she’s beautiful.”

Jonathan took a breath, but neither Phil nor Marie said anything. They just waited, fascinated with Jon’s sudden rush of self-appraisal.

“Of course I’m 42 and married so knowing how to talk to a woman is valuable only if she’s my boss or an IRS auditor,” Jon said to their appreciative laughter. “I think to myself ‘schmuck, if you had only known this stuff twenty years ago, when it might have made a difference, then you wouldn’t have made all the mistakes that you did.’ But of course the only way I could have learned all those things is by screwing them up in the first place.” He sat back in his chair.

Marie said thoughtfully, “You know what you have? A Catch-22.”

“I remember that movie,” Phil said. “Anthony Perkins catches Martin Balsam on the toilet.”

“This is gonna go on until I die,” Jonathan said seriously. “I’ll be on my deathbed—”

Phil interrupted. “Hey, where do you get one of those?”

“What?”

“Deathbeds.”

“What do you mean? I don’t understand...”

“I was just wondering if there’s, like, a special section at the furniture store for deathbeds,” Phil said, winking in Marie’s direction.

Marie caught on quickly, and said with mock seriousness, “I’d like to see something in a deathbed, please.”

“Certainly madam. We have oak, pine, and a new model that’s a convertible.”

“A convertible?”

“Yes, it turns into a coffin,” Phil said with great glee. He and Marie ceremoniously ‘high-fived’ each other. Jonathan, unusually reflective for this or any other time of the day, sounded increasingly annoyed.

“Are you through?” he grumbled. “Minutes from death, I’ll get the last piece of the puzzle. That’s what that white light you hear about in near-death situations is, you know. It’s what happens when you get that last piece of knowledge that you’ve needed all your life and everything clicks into place. You understand it all. Only it’s too late. You’re dead.”

“Hey Jon,” Marie said after a few moments of stunned silence. “Do you ever wonder why we don’t ask you to lunch more often?”

For the first time that day, Jonathan smiled. Marie started to giggle and Phil quickly joined in. Just then, Kenny entered the room, holding a newspaper. He calmly folded it up and swatted Jonathan on top of the head.

“Ow!”

Kenny unfolded the paper and held up the back page (that’s the front sports page) of

the *Boston Herald*. The headline screamed HAT TRICK! “Why can’t you get tickets to games like this one?”

“Oh yea, I saw that on the news last night,” Phil said as he examined the paper.

Marie nodded her head. “So didn’t I. They said it was the first time a game ended with a triple play.”

“An unassisted triple play,” Phil added.

“Did you hear that?” Kenny said as he slapped Jonathan with the paper. “An unassisted triple play! You get us into a rained-out game and we missed an unassisted triple play!”

Phil and Marie laughed as the newspaper hit Jonathan again and again. “Triple play,” Kenny said with every swipe, as Jonathan laughed and forgot all about his Catch-22.

The television in the Bailey living room, like the one in the bedroom, had also become a welcome source of *Détente* in a house that always seemed on the brink of war. So it was that at the end of every day, after the mail had been read and dinner finished and the dishes washed and the prospect of a long evening together loomed ahead, the couple met at the peace table that was the couch in front of the TV. There they could sit together without feeling obligated to say anything to each other, as they wordlessly watched the tube.

It all sounds pretty grim – and it might have been – except that every night a remarkable thing happened. As the evening progressed, and they had spent a few hours so near each other (without speaking) their bodies would get closer. At some point

Jonathan's arm would find its way around Mallory's shoulder or Mallory would lean into him, and without realizing it these two combatants would be enjoying the warmth of each other's company.

And that is precisely what had happened this particular night when a commercial came on Mallory got up for a drink and, in the spirit of Helsinki, asked Jonathan if he wanted anything in the kitchen.

"No thanks," he replied.

She was barely out the room before he had the remote in his hand and had switched from the medical drama they were watching to the Red Sox game. Mallory just rolled her eyes before exiting the room, returning in less than a minute with a can of soda in her hand. "You know, if you want to watch the game instead of our show..."

"No, I just wanna see the score."

"It's right there in the upper left hand corner of the screen. 6 to 1, Red Sox."

Jon, his eyes riveted to the TV, said nothing.

"Can we put our show back on now?" she asked.

"Sure. I just want to see how many outs."

"It says it right there," Mallory said pointing to the screen. "Right there in the corner. Two outs. See?"

She said nothing after that, but even Jon in his Red Sox-induced catatonia should have known there was no way she was going to give up that easily. But he wasn't hearing or seeing anything but that game. "In a second, Mal. I just want to see how many balls and strikes are on the batter—"

Suddenly the remote was out of his hand. He looked up and saw her staring down at him. "It's on the damn screen, Jon. Two strikes and a ball. Even the speed of the last

pitch. What are you waiting for now? The batter's birth sign?"

"Come on, Mal, cut it out" he said as he grabbed the remote back.

Grab. "You cut it out."

Grab. "I'm just watching the game for a second, Mal. I'll put it back to our show, I promise."

Mallory reached for the remote again, but Jonathan decided to make a stand. Her arm stopped in mid-grab. "Our show's probably not even back from commercial, what's it gonna hurt if I just watch until—"

At that instant something primeval must have kicked in, because the next thing Mallory knew she was pulling with all her might, and now she and Jonathan were engaged in a genuine tug-of-remote. And she was winning. Must have been all that practice with the windows, she thought to herself, and she saw the remote beginning to slip from Jonathan's grip. His arms straining now, Jonathan saw what Mallory saw, and realized he had but a few seconds to regain control. He took a deep breath and pulled on the remote with all of his might. Mallory's grip was equally firm, and, as the laws of physics apply here just much as they do on stuck windows, all of the energy Jon was exerting had to go somewhere. Mallory fell forward – and hard – on top of Jonathan, who had fallen backwards, face-up on the couch.

And there they lay, pressed so close that they feel the pounding of each other's heart in their own chests. The entire universe had shrunk to the size of their couch, and as they stared into each other's eyes they both realized that by every law they should be making love right then and there. Somewhere, deep in their eyes, they were, with the same abandon and joy as they had so many years ago. But tonight, physically, with their bodies, well... Tonight there was only the sound of the cheering crowd at the baseball

game coming from the television set. Jonathan turned his head and looked at the TV screen with a great sense of purpose now, afraid that if he turned even slightly their eyes might meet again. At that moment he feared the pain of that contact almost as much as death itself.

Mallory was feeling shame. Shame that she had let those prehistoric feelings get loose like that. Disgusted, she slowly picked herself off the couch and backed out of the living room as Uncomfortable Silence looked down and smiled as the announcer's voice filled the empty room.

"...if the Sox can hold onto this lead it will not only be their eighth win in a row but it will also mean first place tie with the Yankees who lost earlier today. And by golly, fans are really beginning to sit up and take notice of this team. No one can explain why, but it seems like ever since the left field tower was struck by lightning this Red Sox team can't do anything wrong..."

Guy Wayland searched in vain for another donut from the free box his sponsor had delivered to the studio a few hours earlier. Through his headphones he heard the caller whom he had been taunting for the past few minutes ask "How can you argue with first place? I mean just look at the way this team has been playing."

"I'm not arguin' with you, pal. I'm just sayin' don't buy those playoff tickets, yet," Guy said, as he forlornly held up the empty donut box and displayed it to his producer.

"They've won eight in a row!" said the agitated voice on the phone. Guy looked down at a computer screen built into his console and saw a message, typed by his producer, that read "NOT WITHOUT MONEY."

Guy sighed and turned his attention to the caller. “Hey, buddy, do you remember 1978?”

“Here we go again with that Curse crap,” the annoyed caller announced.

“The Red Sox had a fourteen game lead in July and ended up in a one-game playoff with the Yankees. A playoff game they lost because Bucky Dent hit a home run over the Green Monster.”

“Wayland, you are such an idiot. That was twenty-five years ago!”

“Yea, well call me back in October after they’ve blown it all again,” he said, sighing once more at the empty box at his feet...

At that moment, from the radio inside Jonathan’s cubicle, came the sound of a phone being hung up, followed by a dial tone. Jonathan, who had been working on his computer, laughed to himself.

“Do you think they have a shot?” he heard from behind him. It was Phil, who had been standing there listening along to the radio for the past few minutes. Jonathan stopped typing long enough to turn and look at Phil to give him his very best ‘are you kidding me?’ face.

“Let’s hear it for them sure-we-want-win-it-all Sox fans,” Phil said sadly as he walked away, shaking his head. Jonathan laughed as he looked around his cubicle at his Red Sox calendar and Red Sox clock and Red Sox piggy bank and stopped laughing. Maybe it did seem a little silly to root for a team that you knew was never going to win, but isn’t that what being a fan was all about? No, being a fan had something to do with hoping that your team will actually win the championship one day, he heard himself answer. But if he knew that the Red Sox couldn’t win it all... In fact, if every Red Sox fan knew the same thing, *why are any of us fans?*

Why, indeed? Fifty feet below the Boston Common several hundred commuters stood shoulder-to-shoulder on the outbound platform of the Park Street Green Line station, waiting for the next trolley home. Unlike the man named Charlie who was made famous in that song because he didn't have the nickel to get off, these commuters weren't worried about "riding forever 'neath the streets of Boston." Their concern was just getting a seat on one of those packed trolley cars that ran out to the suburbs.

Though there wasn't much room to move, a businessman in a pin striped suit managed to lift an arm so he could hold up and read the sports section of his *Boston Globe*. Behind him, two construction workers, also waiting for the train, saw the headline SOX FINALLY LOSE ONE, below which was the story of how the Red Sox, who had been on a nine game winning streak, lost a close game the night before.

"About time," one of the construction workers said to the other.

"Yea, I was getting worried," the second one replied, as the man in the suit smiled and nodded his head in understanding.

Local historians will tell you that the trendiest section of Boston, the Back Bay, used to be a swamp. They'll tell you how thousands of Irish laborers spent over forty years filling in that swamp with trainloads of dirt brought in on tracks built expressly for the job by even more Irishmen. They will also tell you that as soon as the Irish finished filling in the Back Bay and paving the streets and building hundreds of expensive brick townhouses, the owners moved in and put up signs that read NO IRISH NEED APPLY.

Mallory had listened to that story from her mother-in-law (the former Alice O'Brien) every time they came into town and walked along Newbury Street. Newbury

Street, which is the very heart of the Back Bay, runs from the edge of the Public Garden (where the Swan Boats are located) all the way to Massachusetts Avenue, which is not too far from Kenmore Square, which is just a block from Fenway Park. It is a street with great character, if you are smart enough to pass the expensive shops, trendy boutiques, and over-priced restaurants near the Public Garden and seek out the unusual book stores, antique shops, and record stores closer to Mass Avenue.

Mallory, Francine, Debbie, and Mary Ellen much preferred the trendy, Public Garden part of Newbury Street. Who wants to get their clothes all musty in some dank, dusty bookstore when you can sit outside a charming café, sipping cocktails and enjoying all the sights that Boston has to offer? Which for Mallory, at that moment, was a well-built, impeccably dressed, handsome young man walking by. The resulting sigh was audible as far away as the Swan Boats.

Debbie and Mary Ellen giggled like they were back in high school. And, just like she did in high school, Francine asked what no one else dared.

“So, how long has it been?”

“Francine!” was Debbie’s shocked response. Mary Ellen just sat there with her mouth open in disbelief.

“Oh, please. It couldn’t be more obvious”

Debbie looked sternly at Francine. “Do you really think that’s necessary?”

Mary Ellen chose the maternal route. She patted Mallory on the arm. “Every man goes through one of these spells.”

Mallory looked at her skeptically. “Oh yea? Has Kenny?”

“Well... No, Kenny actually hasn’t had one, but I’ve heard it happens all the time.”

Francine was shaking her head. “Bullshit. We’re talking about men here. The only

excuses for a dry spell are death... or castration. Believe me, they're either getting it at home or they're getting it someplace else. But they're getting it."

"Francine!" Debbie and Mary Ellen screamed at the same time.

"What?" Francine replied. She just couldn't understand what they were so upset with her about, or why the two of them looked so embarrassed, especially when it was so clear to her that was precisely what Mallory was thinking.

"That's all right," she heard Mallory say. "I've wondered the same thing, too, you know?"

Bingo. "And...?" Francine asked.

"It's just not possible." Mallory said, shaking her head.

"Why not?"

"Please, we're talking about Jonathan here."

Debbie looked at Mary Ellen with a look that said 'now we understand.' Mallory saw it too.

"What the hell was that?"

"I didn't say anything," Debbie replied.

"I know you didn't. I want to know what that look was supposed to mean."

"It was nothing."

Mallory pouted. "I thought you guys were on my side."

"We are," Debbie said. "But I'm sorry. We've been friends for over twenty years, okay, so I just feel like I can ask you how you think a guy is supposed to be, you know, romantic when you're all, you know, down on him."

"I am not all down on him. In fact I'm always encouraging him."

Now it was Mary Ellen's turn. "Encouraging, Mallory? Or is it nagging?"

“Hey what’s going on here?”

“They’re only trying to help you, Mallory,” Francine said. “But what they’re trying to do is pin the blame on you and that’s not fair.”

“Thank you, Francine,” Mallory replied gratefully.

“Because you can’t trust the cheating bastard,” said Francine. “You need to hire a detective.”

“And I still say you have to try to like, be romantic,” Debbie offered. “You know, put the moves on him. Guys like that kind of thing.”

“Yea, if they’re in high school,” Francine said with a sneer. “Come one Mal, give it up, already. We know you’re holding something back. Tell us what’s really going on.”

“Look, I don’t like to talk about it, okay?”

Now it was Francine’s turn to reach for her hand. “Mallory?”

Mallory sighed. “All right... I’m not saying it’s the only thing, okay, but... it’s just not been the same since... since the operation,” she said softly. “Maybe I’m ashamed because I got sick in the first place. I know it’s not my fault, but sometimes... I don’t know. Maybe it was because Jonathan was afraid to start having sex again. The doctor said we could and all but he never seemed to want to. And maybe that’s because... I don’t know, maybe he sensed I didn’t really want him to. Maybe...” She shrugged her shoulders again and sighed.

“You have to reach out to him if you want save this relationship,” Debbie insisted.

“If that’s what you want...” Mary Ellen added.

“Now what the hell is that supposed to mean?” Mallory said defensively.

“Nothing. Never mind,” Mary Ellen said quietly, as she turned her attention to her drink. The others, feeling like they had crossed over an imaginary line, were silent, as

well.

From around the corner came another man, even more handsome than the first. But the girls weren't looking at him, they were all staring at Mallory. "Go to hell, all of you," she said as she stared down Newbury Street.

Other teams may have more championships, but at its heart, Boston is a baseball town. The Sox could be twelve games out with three to play but it would still be hard to find a radio on the beach or television in a bar that wasn't tuned to the game. A losing Red Sox team can generate enough passion to fill a whole summer night's worth of conversation, while a contender has the ability to ignite this city and the region like nothing else can. When the Sox are in the hunt every street corner, subway stop, bar, office—the air itself in New England is filled with a distinctive mix of self-assurance and trepidation, of hope and inevitability, of desire and despair, of the future... and of the past. And here, the past weighs heavy around every fan's neck.

It's a uniquely New England mind-set. A Red Sox team that is in first place in mid-July generates a strange kind of confidence: A confidence that somehow, someday, their beloved team will break their hearts. And this year was no different.

The team was in first place by three games as they prepared to go on a long road trip that included playing two other first-place teams. Much to Mallory's displeasure Jonathan stayed up late every night to watch those games even though he—along with every other fan—expected the difficult schedule to cause his team to collapse. It did not, and when Red Sox returned from their road trip they were five games ahead of the second-place Yankees. A four game series with New York awaited them upon their

return. Over in Southie waiting for the start of the first game of the series, Jimmy O'Hara sat on his barstool waiting (expecting, really) for the Sox' ace pitcher to strain a muscle or lose his fastball. But the pitcher doesn't. Instead he throws a no-hitter and the Sox go on to take three of four from the hated Yankees.

In early August, with the team seven games ahead, Guy Wayland spent his days fanning the flames of doubt by reminding his listeners of Red Sox teams with even greater leads that had folded horribly in the hot, humid weather of August. And, as the distance between the Red Sox and the Yankees increased, so did the vitriol from the corpulent talk host. Strange thing was, his ratings only got bigger, too. As did the smile on Joe Murphy's face.

Through September, as the summer tourists went home and the kids went back to school and the leaves turned colors and the foliage tourists began to arrive, the Red Sox continued to defy history and common sense. They lost, occasionally, which was a good thing for New Englanders down on the subway platforms and in the bars and the cubicles and the office lunchrooms who seemed to breathe a little easier because the expected collapse was finally beginning. But then the next day another winning streak would begin and the regional angst would be replenished.

Perhaps that's why when, at the end of the season when the Red Sox had won their division with the best record in the American League, no one—not Jonathan nor Jimmy O'Hara nor the people down on the subway platforms knew what to say. Oh, people cheered, for sure. They held up banners and waved pennants. But it was all done with the restraint of a man going on a blind date. Any other city would be awash in wild optimism. In Boston it was confident pessimism. Which is why Guy Wayland could go on the air and say that "they'll be a ball going through someone's legs during the

playoffs” and not get fired.

Everyone knew the Red Sox would have to win two series against two very good teams to advance to the World Series. Everyone also knew that the Red Sox hadn't done that since 1986. Well, what did that have to do with this team, the optimists wanted to know? Just wait and see, Jonathan and his type responded. How shocked they all were when the Sox finished off their first round opponents in three straight games. Now all they had to do was win four out of seven games against the other American League finalist.

Somehow it was fitting that the opponent should be the New York Yankees. Just four years beforehand the Yankees beat the Red Sox before going on to another World Series, which they won. The memories of that 1999 series still stuck like a dagger in the hearts of many Red Sox fans, who saw in the Yankees another humiliation about to befall their team. But out came the pennants and the big foam fingers and the faithful trudged to Yawkey Way to bear witness to this year's reason why their team would not win it all. What they saw instead was an evisceration worthy of the finest medical school in the country as the Red Sox won the series against the Yankees. What could be better than beating the Yankees? How about beating them four straight?

The Red Sox were the American League champions.

He sat in a dark corner of a neighborhood bar, watching the television from a distant table as the last Yankee batter struck out and the Red Sox won the League championship. It felt at that moment as if the city was shaking down to its bedrock as people jumped up and down and hugged each other and screamed with joy. Sure there was still a World

Series to play, sure there was that nagging feeling inside every fan, but right now there was only the inexpressible joy of finally beating those bastards from New York. He smiled, and it was at that moment that he first allowed himself to think that it was actually going to happen, and his heart began to race as the weight which had been perched on his shoulders all these years begin to lighten.

Jonathan Bailey stumbled a bit as he entered his kitchen. He could feel the cold of the linoleum floor through his slippers, but he was so groggy he welcomed anything that would help him wake up. For most of October he had been staying up late watching each and every Red Sox game and the schedule was taking its toll. *Thank goodness for timers on coffee machines*, he thought as he poured himself a large mug of caffeine, turned on the television—already set to ESPN—which at that moment was re-capping the previous night’s game.

“Didn’t you watch this game?” he heard an irritated voice say. He looked up to see Mallory pouring herself a cup of coffee.

“I’m sorry, did I wake you?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“I was just wondering what you were doing up, that’s all.”

“Just because I don’t work doesn’t mean I don’t have things to do, you know,” she said testily. Jonathan groaned to himself. Why did he always have to be so stupid and ask such open-ended questions? Mallory was now looking at the TV with disdain. “So do they win again when you watch it the second time?”

From anyone else that would have been a pretty funny joke, but Jonathan knew

better than to laugh. Instead, he just sat quietly and watched the television as Mallory made her breakfast.

The reporter was standing on the field at Fenway Park, and the camera was positioned to the giant green wall in left field was behind her. “As they have in their last four World Series appearances stretching back to 1946,” she was saying, “the Boston Red Sox will play a seventh and deciding game against their National League opponents. And just as they have done since 1918, the Red Sox faithful will wait see if their team will do what no Red Sox team has done since Woodrow Wilson was president—win a World Series. And in a twist that is delighting fans from Fall River to Presque Isle, if the Red Sox do pull off a victory, it would come at the expense of the New York Mets, their nemesis in their last series appearance 17 years ago, the one that featured the now famous ‘ball through Buckner’s legs.’ Margo Phillips for ESPN sports.”

Jonathan looked up from the television to see that Mallory was looking right at him. “So does this mean that after tonight you’re going to start going to bed at a reasonable hour?” she asked.

Jon could only nod his head and shut the TV off.

To be honest, the seventh game of the World Series really wasn’t that good. The Sox scored early and the Mets never really threatened, and in the ninth inning, with the Mets down by four runs, two of their batters quickly popped out. Now their last batter was facing the Red Sox best reliever.

Strike one.

Sitting on his couch in the living room, with his team so close to their goal, Jonathan

realized the mistake he had made inviting Phil, Marie, and Kenny over to his house to watch the game.

Ball One.

He saw that long-ago time when his great-grandfather held his eight-year-old's hand on Washington Street as they watched the score of the 1918 World Series being posted in the newspaper window.

Strike Two!

There was his grandfather, trying to fix that old Zenith so his nine-year-old son could hear the one game playoff between the Sox and the Cleveland.

There's a foul ball into the stands. Still one strike away.

Through the tears that were beginning to fill his eyes Jon saw the old color TV that made everything brown, the one in their living room back in Medford.

Another ball. It was now two strikes and two balls on the last Mets batter.

Now Jon was remembering the smell of the daiquiri on his new sweater that night in 1986 when the ball went through—

STRIKE THREE! THE RED SOX WIN!

Kenny, Marie, and Phil had literally been at the edge of the couch but now they shot up like three bottle rockets and began jumping up and down, screaming and hugging each other. On the TV they could see fireworks going off over the ball park as fans rushed past the security team onto the field. Mallory, who had been keeping her distance from Jonathan and his guests, stood at the entrance to the living room watching her husband with great curiosity. Why isn't he jumping up and down like his idiot friends, she wondered. Isn't this what he wanted? Finally, after what seemed like forever, the jumping and the hugging stopped, and Kenny, Marie, and Phil collapsed on the couch,

where they clasped Jonathan's hands. He was grateful to them for not saying anything, for he was sure he would choke up if he tried. Together they just stared at the television and listened to the sound of the crowd as they watched fireworks going off all over the city.

Eventually, choking with emotion, the announcer began to speak. "Some New Englanders would have told you that this night was impossible. That the sale by Boston of a young, power-hitting pitcher from the streets of Baltimore—a kid named Babe Ruth - to the New York Yankees was such an affront to the baseball Gods that a Curse was laid upon this team. As fanciful a notion as a Curse might seem to the rest of the nation and the world, the Curse slowly revealed itself to be a very formidable idea, even to the taciturn, stoic New Englander. There seemed to be some things that you couldn't fight. There were late season folds, bloop home runs, clumsy base running, and just plain bad luck that might have had logical answers. But most New Englanders seemed happy to point out that their anguish was due to a real, honest to goodness Curse. But no more. Take heart New England, your Curse is broken."

The two paramedics were sweating and exhausted from their attempt to revive the old man laying there on the barroom floor. They looked at each other, shook their heads sadly, and began disconnecting the hoses and tubes from the now lifeless body.

"That's it, then?" the bartender asked softly. One of the paramedics nodded his head, and all around the bar the old men crossed themselves and whispered novenas.

"Poor Jimmy O'Hara," came a somber voice from the darkness.

"Look at it this way," the bartender said. "The last thing he saw, God rest his soul,

was the Red Sox win the World Series.”

They all nodded and crossed themselves again.

He stood on Yawkey Way and felt the earth tremble from the cheers emanating from inside the ballpark. Above him, fireworks exploded in a flurry of red, white, and blue. All over the city he could hear church bells peal. From every direction thousands of people carrying pennants, holding signs, and waving American flags converged outside Fenway Park where they screamed and danced and celebrated a moment so many had hoped for, but so few believed would actually occur.

It was over now. With a last look at the old ballpark he turned up Brookline Avenue and, with a slight hobble, walked away from the crowd.

In a tiny, cluttered, two-room apartment in the Allston-Brighton neighborhood of Boston, Guy Wayland had been watching the game on television set he had begged from a sponsor. Slumped in a tattered, old chair (his only piece of furniture) amidst the remains of that night's dinner, Guy Wayland, that taunter of Red Sox fans, that fanner of flames, listened to the tinny sound of the exalting crowd and the fireworks and the church bells as they squeezed through the television's tiny speakers.

“Oh, shit.”

CHAPTER 6.

Double Play

Jonathan opened his eyes slowly and deliberately, afraid that if he did so quickly, the bubble that was this wonderful dream would burst and he would have to face the dismal prospect that what he thought happened last night didn't—that it was a cruel dream, the Red Sox hadn't won the game but instead blew it with stupid base running or, worse yet, with an easy ground ball dribbling through someone's legs.

"Well, I guess congratulations are in order."

"Thanks," he replied mechanically to his wife, who was laying on her side next to him in their bed. Then it struck him—what she had just said and what it meant. Last night wasn't a dream. The bubble wasn't going to burst, after all. The Red Sox really had won the World Series. He was just beginning to take it all in when...

"Can I ask you something?" he heard his wife ask.

"Yea, sure," he replied, turning on his side to face her. As he did, he realized that he hadn't looked at her this closely since that night on the couch. *Too bad*, he thought, *because she still has two of the most beautiful green eyes I have ever seen.*

"Last night, when they finally won, you seemed so... down."

"Down? What do you mean?"

"I don't know. The game ended and the Red Sox had won and Marie and Kenny

and that new guy were screaming and jumping up and down like a bunch of idiots but you were just sitting there.” She paused, suddenly looking contrite. “Sorry, I apologize for using the word idiots.”

“That’s okay,” he replied sincerely. “I guess we did look a little silly.”

“Well the others did. But you, Jon, you looked so sad that I swore you were going to cry. Were you?”

Jonathan thought briefly about trying to explain to her about his great-grandfather and how they no longer post the scores on Washington Street or how Joy Street and the old Zenith tube radio is gone and so are his great-grandfather, grandfather, and father and how it wasn’t fair that they couldn’t be with him on that couch to enjoy it, too. Instead, he just mumbled “I dunno. Guess I was in shock.” He looked at her for a few more seconds, studying those green eyes of hers like he was seeing them for the first time. Then he got up and ambled to the bathroom. Mallory didn’t say anything else. Though she couldn’t figure out why, she just lay there, unable to stop watching him until he had crossed the room and shut the bathroom door behind him.

Jonathan hated commuting. Some guys claimed they actually liked the time they spent in their cars driving to and from work, that it was good to get away from the pressures of the office and, in some cases, the home. Of course, these same guys had cell phones and pagers and even fax machines in their cars so Jonathan couldn’t see what the difference was if you were always talking to someone, anyway. Maybe, Jonathan thought, if he drove a Lexus or BMW with a seat that adjusted by computer or had the built-in back massager he might like driving more too, but all in all he’d rather be on the

couch at home.

On this morning, however, he was happy for the traffic, because it gave him more time to listen to the radio and hear what that Red Sox-hating weasel, Guy Wayland, was going to say on his first show after the Red Sox had won the World Series. And his callers were having a field day.

“Where’s your bleepin’ Yankees now, Wayland? How come I don’t hear about any balls going through Buckner’s legs, now, you fat bastard?” Jonathan heard one say, the venom practically squirting from the radio.

“I don’t know what to say, caller,” Wayland replied smugly with the kind of false obsequiousness that made Jonathan think that Guy was probably one of those kids who got beaten up every day in the school yard for his lunch money—by the teachers.

“Except I’m happy for the Red Sox and I’m happy for Red Sox fans. Watching the Yankees win 27 championships while you sucked wind was not only depressing, but boring, as well. So I say congratulations.”

“And I say you are one rotten—”

Back at the radio station, both Guy and his producer heard the caller finish his four—well, twelve, actually—letter thought, but thanks to the station’s seven second delay, their listeners would not have that pleasure. All Jonathan and thousands of other listeners heard over their radios was Guy saying “Well, I don’t know what my mother has to do with it but I guess when you’re so used to losing that when you finally win one you don’t know how to react like good sports.”

At the radio station, standing in the back of the producer’s booth leaning against the wall, Joe Murphy watched Guy Wayland adeptly deflecting every caller with the same smarmy guile that had made him so reviled, yet so successful over the past two years.

Joe smiled and said to the producer “You know, I used to worry about what I’d do if that Sox ever won it all. Zinging the Red Sox fans is his whole act, right?” The producer nodded with a cynical smile as he pointed to Guy to prepare for a commercial break “Mark my words,” Joe continued, “he’s going to be bigger than ever.”

Joe said this just as Guy’s microphone turned off, and the corpulent host took the opportunity to vanquish another pastry. The producer watched as crumbs flew in all directions, shook his head and said, “Jesus, any bigger and he’ll explode.”

The station manager laughed. “Let me know when that’s gonna happen. I’ll sell it as a special and we can raise the rates that day.”

Jonathan pulled into the parking lot and laughed to himself as he saw a number of people who had parked but not gotten out of their cars. From the gleeful looks on their faces it was obvious they were all listening to the Guy Wayland show, too. Who says revenge is a dish served cold? Today it was steaming hot and tasted just fine.

Jonathan got to his cubicle and began the routine of unpacking his carrying bag and booting up his computer when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw that the door to Brian’s office was open. The morning sun was shining through the window into the office and—here was something Jonathan never noticed before—the bright light beaming down through some moving clouds onto that thick maroon carpet made it look like a rolling red sea. It looked so comfortable that he wanted to take off his shoes and run through the thick, dreamy pile.

Jonathan scowled. Why hadn’t he noticed how nice and inviting that carpeting looked, before?

“So has it sunk in?”

Standing in front of Jon at the entrance to his cubicle, suddenly blocking the view of the office, was Kenny, beaming from ear to ear. Next to him were Phil and Marie. They all looked like they missed some sleep. “I’ll tell ya,” Kenny continued, “I still can’t believe it.”

“I heard they had to shut down the whole area around Fenway Park,” Marie said. “Kenmore Square, Brookline Avenue, Boylston Street—”

“Did you guys hear about the parade?” Phil asked.

“Yea,” Kenny said. “The Mayor’s gonna hold some kind of celebration at City Hall.”

“I heard the Governor is closing all the state offices,” Marie said as if she were imparting some great secret.

“Well, who in Boston is gonna get any work done, anyway?” Kenny replied.

“Who’s gonna get any work done anywhere?” said Phil.

Marie was actually giggling. “This is so fantastic.”

“Jon, seriously, man,” Kenny said. “D’ever think you’d live to see this day?”

Kenny looked to see sadness sweep across Jon’s face. “Jon, what is it?”

“I was just thinking,” he said. “I wish my old man had.”

There was a moment of silence—all of them had heard Jon’s tell about his father and grandfather and how important baseball was in their lives. Finally, Marie stepped forward into the cube and put her hand on his shoulder. “Come on, Jon, coffee’s on me this morning.”

Jonathan looked up at her gratefully. “Well, what are we waiting for?” and, as he stood up, began singing. “We... are the champions, of the world...” and Phil, Marie, and

Kenny joined in as they began to head down the aisle. As Jonathan exited his cubicle he looked once again at the waves of maroon luxury rolling gently in the morning sunlight he tried to shake off the feeling that something was wrong.

The strange feeling dogged Jonathan for the next few weeks every time he looked into that office or at his wife. He managed, as was his style, to push it off as something that would go away. It was crazy, he lectured to himself. Mallory's eyes weren't any greener and the carpeting in Brian's office wasn't any redder than they were before. Or were they?

"The worst month? No contest. We're in the middle of it right now," Jonathan was saying to Phil, Kenny, and Marie over lunch in the cafeteria. "There's no other way to put it. January sucks. Look, Christmas is over, everybody is let down, and all you've got to look forward to are the bills from December and three more months of cold, snowy weather. The worst thing of all is this clean slate business. People talk about how the New Year is supposed to be a fresh start but you turn on the news New Year's Day and there's another fire and another murder and you realize this year won't be any different than the last." He took a deep breath, as if he were recovering from running a marathon. Perhaps, in his mind, he was. So many things were going through his head since that night in October. He pursed his lips and exhaled.

Kenny, Marie, and Phil cast furtive glances between themselves. Just last week there had been a private discussion about how the usually affable and easy-going

Jonathan was... could it be possible... did they actually use the word moody to describe him?

Marie talked about how, one morning, she caught him looking so sadly at Brian's office that she thought he was going to burst into tears. Kenny recalled for them the surprisingly quiet way Jon had greeted the victory of the Red Sox in the World Series. Phil just shook his head and kept saying how he would never understand New Englanders who wished and wished for things to happen and when they did happened no one knew how to enjoy it.

What Jonathan's office-mates didn't know, what he hadn't told them, was how rough the Christmas holiday had been at home. It all began when, at the big family dinner, Mallory's sister announced that she was pregnant. It wasn't deliberately cruel on her part, of course. After all, it was unfair to expect that the rest of the world should either stop having babies or stop talking about them just because Mallory couldn't have one. Anyway, after Jonathan and Mallory had gotten home that night, Jonathan watched her cry and pound the pillow and ask God why things had to be this way. He started crying himself when he saw those still-beautiful green eyes filled with tears because if God answer her question, then what chance did he have?

He had thought maybe time was all she needed. After all, it wasn't the first instance of someone she knew having a baby. She had gotten upset, of course, but eventually they got on with their life, although, as Jonathan had learned the past Saturday night, things would be horribly different. It had been a bitterly cold night and there was a light snow falling, so they decided to stay in, and he and Mallory were having a surprisingly pleasant evening on the couch, watching television, when he detected what he thought was an invitation for an advance.

“Jon, what are you doing?”

“I, uh... well, I just thought that, you know, you wanted me to.” He felt stupidly ashamed, like a pawing high school boy on a first date.

“Well, I don’t,” she replied coldly.

“I’m sorry.”

Then there was silence. Silence so deep, so severe, that Jonathan swore he could hear the sound of the snow hitting the ground just outside the window. He looked at her—not with longing now, but with concern. He turned off the television. “Mal? What is it? Talk to me, please.”

She was quiet for a long time, and when she finally spoke, it was creepy. There was a hollowness to her voice, to her words, as if she were speaking from a script. She never looked at him as she spoke, she just stared into the darkness of the living room.

“I’ve never been someone who was tied to dogma, Jon, but I can’t get it out of my mind that somehow, in some small way that there’s something wrong with... that by itself.”

“By that, you mean our lovemaking?”

“Yes.”

He mulled that over for a moment. “What do you mean, by itself?” he asked.

She turned and looked at him so sadly he wanted to cry. “Isn’t it supposed to have a meaning... a purpose?”

“What about making each other happy?”

She frowned. “Maybe it’s the Irish Catholic in me, but when you say it like that it sounds dirty.”

“Only if we do it right,” he replied. Damn. He was trying to be funny and glib and

perhaps make her smile but that was the wrong thing to say and he knew it even as it was leaving his lips. He cursed himself for being so stupid. "I'm sorry," he said sincerely, but he knew that she was getting angry now. Angry at her situation. Angry at the doctors. Angry at him.

"A baby would make me happy Jonathan." He was surprised to hear the words wobble a bit, as if she were holding back tears. But almost as quickly her voice became stronger, as she said "and please don't remind why that isn't possible, okay?"

"It may not be possible the natural way, Mal, but as I've said before we could always adopt."

"Oh, God," she said, standing up and pacing back and forth as she spoke. "The last desperate act of a desperate couple."

"Why is it desperate to give a child a chance at life?"

"Who are you, Sally Struthers?"

Jonathan sighed. "Mal, all I know is what you know, that it's not going to happen for us, you know, having our own child, but I also know that it doesn't mean we can't be parents and give a kid a good home."

She looked at him with all the disgust she could muster. "You're not a woman. You don't understand."

"I understand that you want one of your own, but isn't it time you accepted—"

"God-damn, it!" she exploded. "Must you be so God-damned accepting all the time? Can't you get angry?"

"At who, Mallory? At who? You? Why should I get angry at you? It's not your fault. At the doctors? It's not theirs, either. There's no one to get mad at. It just is, that's all. It just... is" He looked up and saw that her whole body was trembling, now,

and watched her hands slowly rise up and cover her face. Then came the sound. A terrible, primeval wail that tore through the room and ripped into his heart. Before he had the chance to react he saw her collapse into a sobbing heap on the floor. “Mallory!” he screamed as he raced to her side.

“Go away,” he heard her sobbing voice from beneath the heap. He kneeled on the floor and looked at her helplessly, afraid to help but afraid not to. Slowly, covered her body with his, as if shielding her from a reality that was battering her poor soul. They lay there for a long time until he felt the sobbing stop and as the snow fell softly outside and they fell asleep there on the floor.

That awful night had haunted Jonathan ever since, and was still running through his head as he returned from lunch to his cubicle. He was actually glad when Brian came from across the aisle and asked if he would do him a special favor.

“I hate to make you into a delivery service, Jon,” Brian said with his patented, transparent, insincerity. “But if I wait until pick-up time then the agency won’t get these proofs. Would you mind driving into Boston and delivering them for me?”

Jonathan was smart enough to mask his pleasure at the impromptu assignment, instead feigning a “sure-boss-whatever-you-need-even-though-it-will-take-me-away-from-my-very-busy-job” look. Jonathan had another reason for accepting the menial task with such hidden glee. The agency Brian where needed the delivery made was located on Brookline Avenue, just a few blocks from Fenway Park.

Driving to Boston, listening to an FM music station, Jonathan realized that it had been a while since he had listened to Guy Wayland’s show. He laughed when he thought

of those first few weeks after the World Series when bashing Wayland was so in vogue that everyone, even non-sports fans, listened to hear him get roasted by callers from Cape Cod to Hampton Beach. But even listening to someone as loathsome as Guy writhing in daily agony got old in a hurry, and since Jonathan couldn't generate the interest in anything but baseball, his radio drifted away, along with his attention.

As his car headed down Brookline Avenue and the light towers over the Green Monster came into view, he recalled the electricity that seemed to permeate the whole city during those weeks leading up to the World Series. He could almost smell the peanuts roasting and sausages grilling during those cool September evenings when the Red Sox were on everyone's mind as they raced for the World Series. Jonathan, now on Brookline Avenue at the intersection of Yawkey Way, looked to his right and saw his beloved Fenway Park, right across the street. Before he realized it, he had pulled his car over to the side of the street, where he could sit and watch the flags on top of the park dancing in the strong, cold January wind.

An old song by R.E.M. called "End of the World" played softly from the car radio, and Jonathan found himself singing along with the song's chorus as he looked across Brookline Avenue and, in his mind, saw a warm spring day many years ago when a young boy and his father raced each other from the Kenmore Square subway stop up to the Red Sox ticket office. "It's the end of the world, as we know it," he hummed to himself, and now he was seeing the fireworks bursting over Fenway Park just after the last out was recorded that wonderful October night.

"...That the sale by Boston of a young, power-hitting pitcher from the streets of Baltimore—a kid named Babe Ruth - to the New York Yankees was such an affront to the baseball Gods that a Curse was laid upon this team," he recalled the announcer saying

over the joyous screams of the fans celebrating behind her. “And as fanciful a notion as a Curse might seem to the rest of the nation, over the years the Curse slowly revealed itself to be a very formidable idea, even to the taciturn, stoic New Englander. There seemed to be some things that you couldn’t fight,” he could hear her saying.

“End of the world as we know it...”

The song ended.

The cheers faded.

The fireworks stopped.

They were replaced by the merciless January wind, racing in from the harbor that made the flags shiver stiffly over the Green Monster. Suddenly a car horn blared from behind him, abruptly ripping Jonathan from his reverie. Jon waved sheepishly to a truck driver trying to pull his delivery van into the loading zone he had taken, and pulled away from the curb and down the cold, snow-covered street, wracking his brain trying to figure out why he was so God-damned depressed.

That night, as a light snow fell on the Bailey homestead, Jonathan and Mallory ate their dinner in grisly silence. Neither was very hungry, and both picked absent-mindedly at their food. Jonathan stopped to look out the window at the snow swirling around the window in the moonlight.

“You know, the damndest thing...” he said to no one in particular as he continued to watch the snow.

The interruption caught Mallory by surprise. “What?”

“I was driving by Fenway Park today and—”

“You were in town? Boston?”

“Yea. Brian asked me to help him out with a presentation. Anyway, I was driving past Fenway and—”

Mallory was truly stunned. “Brian asked you to help him out?”

“Yes. He’s my boss. He asked for help. I gave it to him. Geez.”

“I’m sorry, really I am. Go ahead, Jon.”

He was silent.

Then, as sincerely as she could, “Please?”

Jonathan looked at her skeptically, then, slowly, began. “Well, I was driving past Fenway Park on my way to my appointment,” he said, omitting the fact that he was simply acting as a delivery service. “And the next thing I knew I had pulled over by the ball park. I guess just had to stop and look at it, you know. The ballpark, I mean. It’s still like a dream to me that the Sox actually won the World Series. And I’m looking at Fenway and thinking about my old man and all those teams we used to root for and all of a sudden I was struck by the damndest thought.”

“What?” she asked, surprised at how interested she really was.

“It’s something Phil said to me once that’s stuck with me. He said that all my life I’ve been a Red Sox fan and rooted for them to win a World Series. But at the same time, deep down, I knew they never would because there was this Curse.”

“For selling Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees,” Mallory said matter-of-factly. The look on Jonathan’s face made her laugh. “Well don’t act so surprised. I did grow up here, you know.”

He smiled back. “My fault for underestimating you.”

This admission seemed to energize her. “You know, growing up I used to hear

about this Curse all the time,” she said. “Always seemed so silly to me. I mean what does what happened a hundred years ago have to do with what happens today?”

“But don’t you see? That’s just it! With the Red Sox it was easy to believe in things like a Curse.” He was finding her sudden interest in this subject energizing, as well. “It almost became necessary to believe in the Curse it to keep yourself from going crazy every time they got so close to winning it all and then blowing it.”

“So now they’ve won. You should be happy. It turns out there is no Curse.”

“No, that’s just the point, don’t you see?” he said with more than a touch of panic in his voice. “If there wasn’t a Curse then that means that all along the answer was that they just weren’t good enough to win it all.”

“I’m confused. So you’re saying you think it’s better to be unlucky than bad?”

Jonathan stood up and began pacing back and forth in the dimly lit kitchen, afraid to look her in the eye. “All I know is that all these years I’ve accepted a ball dribbling through some guys legs or a runner falling down at third base as something mystical rather than physical. I’ve been disappointed, sure, but I’ve just shrugged my shoulders and said ‘well, that’s the Curse for you!’

“But what else could you have done about it? You weren’t playing for the Red Sox.”

He stopped pacing. “I’m not talking about the Red Sox.” He looked at her desperately. “I’m talking about me,” he choked, and he closed his eyes in an attempt to keep the tears from spilling out.

Now it was Mallory’s turn to wonder what to do. She knew the moment called for some show of support, even though every fiber in her body wanted to scream “Isn’t this what I’ve been saying to you for all these years?” But she looked up at Jonathan and

realized that the part of her brain that was dying to deliver the I-told-you-so speech was no longer functioning. As she watched a single tear begin to trickle down Jonathan's cheek, she found the instinct had evaporated, replaced instead with a singular, over-riding desire to comfort him and to let him know that everything was going to be all right. *A mothering instinct*, she laughed to herself? Wouldn't that be ironic, huh?

Jonathan opened his eyes, looked down, and realized that she had taken his hand. Now what, he wondered? He thought about what happened after that awful night she had collapsed on the floor and they had fallen asleep in the living room. He recalled how the next morning, they woke up and had looked at each other and, without a word, had gotten up, showered, dressed, and proceeded with their day. That night, when he returned from the office they ate dinner as they always did, and by eight o'clock were back on the couch in front of the TV. It wasn't until Jonathan's head hit the pillow later that night he realized the entire day had gone by without a single word having been spoken. Fifteen years of marriage and avoiding difficult subjects—that was a lot of practice—made it easy to behave like that.

But now, as Jonathan watched the reflection of the snow falling in Mallory's beautiful green eyes, he suddenly saw something he had not seen in years, not since that night when the meeting of a daiquiri and a new sweater conspired to bring two unlikely people together. He was seeing compassion, and understanding, and he knew that something fundamental had changed.

And he was scared to death.

“Admiral on the bridge,” Brian yelled out as Gene entered the conference room.

Jonathan, seated in his usual place at the middle-of-the-table, thought he detected in Gene's expression something other than amusement. It was almost as if Gene were rolling his eyes without actually moving them. Jonathan looked around the table, curious if anyone else had noticed it, as well, but all he saw were the usual mix of anticipation, hunger, and indifference that made these meetings so damn interesting.

"Good morning, everyone," Gene said pleasantly enough. "Let's get started. Brian, that was a fine bit of work on the trade show booth. Everyone in the Valley loved it."

"Thank you, Gene." Jonathan suddenly realized that the sound of his smarmy little voice was not amusing to him anymore. In fact, it was making him sick. Even the way Brian adjusted his cufflinks as he spoke seemed choreographed to rub his accomplishment in our faces. *Was this guy really any smarter than me*, Jonathan asked himself? *Does this guy actually understand our business better than me? Are his feet any more deserving of that nice maroon carpeting than mine?*

"Now I'd like to ask if anyone is interested in taking on a special project for me. We have an opportunity to pitch some new business in the Valley, and I'm looking for a business-oriented presentation that really shows off our—"

"I'll do it!" Jonathan heard an anxious voice yell out. It was said with such urgency that several people in the room laughed. *Great*, Jonathan thought. *Which kiss-ass couldn't even wait for Gene to finish the damn sentence before pouncing on this chance to suck up?* He shook his head in disgust and looked around the table for the culprit when realized that Gene was looking at him with a bemused, but pleased smile. Then he heard a voice that sounded remarkably familiar say "That is, I have some ideas about that, sir..."

Holy shit, Jon realized. *That's my voice!*

“Very good, Jon. Why don’t you drop by my office tomorrow morning and you can tell me what they are. Now, next on the agenda is the Corpus Christi dot Com evaluation. I’ll need a couple of people to review the...” Jon could not longer hear Gene due to the noise being made by a pounding heartbeat mixed with heavy breathing that was drowning out all other sounds. Then he realized it was his own pounding heartbeat and heavy breathing. Jonathan looked down at his chest, fully expecting to see the outline of his heart pressing against his shirt, like in some Bugs Bunny cartoon.

It would have been a waste to ask Jonathan what occurred during the rest of the meeting, because he was too busy trying figure out what the hell had just happened. If the looks of surprise and awe on the faces of Phil, Marie, and Kenny were any indication, so were they. He smiled back at them, sheepishly. Then he glanced over and saw something in Neil and Brian’s eyes he had never seen before in his life, not from a co-worker or classmate or friend or anybody—it was the look of jealous anger. *They are really pissed off at me*, Jonathan realized.

The thought made him feel both giddy and, at the same time, a bit panic stricken. *Jesus*, he thought as he closed his eyes, *If I don’t do this right they’ll cut me to shreds*. He opened his eyes and another chill went down his spine. Neil and Brian, unsmiling, were nodding at him, as if they had heard what he was thinking and wanted him to know that he was right... they would.

Back at his cubicle, for the first time in his life, he had to say the following over the phone to his wife: “No, Mallory, I don’t know how late I’m going to be. I told you, I volunteered for a special project. No, I’m not kidding you.” He looked up to see Kenny wearing a huge smile. “Look, I’ll call you later. Yes, I promise.”

“So, it’s the big man with the big idea,” Kenny said as Jonathan hung up the phone.

“Yea, that’s me, all right.”

Kenny looked both ways down the aisle and, seeing the area was clear, leaned into Jon’s cubicle and said, in a stage whisper, “Well, you really tucked it to Neil. He told Marie that he was all set to present his plan, too.”

“Too? What too?” Jonathan whispered desperately. He looked up at Kenny, sheer panic swimming in his eyes. “I don’t have any plan.”

“Then what the hell did you volunteer for?”

“Beats the shit outta me. It was like some out of body experience. I saw my hand go up and heard someone with my voice saying he had some big ideas for the new presentation.”

“Well you’ll come up with something.”

Jonathan just sighed and shook his head. Then he looked past Kenny, across the aisle, through the open door of Brian’s office at that carpeting. To his own surprise the panic was slowly being replaced by... what was that feeling? My God, it was... resolve. “You’re right. I will.”

Hours later, when the day was over and most of the Tennis.Net employees were packing up their laptops for the trip home, Kenny heard a strange sound coming from Jonathan’s cubicle: that of typing after five o’clock. He peered around the corner of the cube and saw his friend, stone-faced and hunched over his computer. “Hey buddy,” Kenny said softly.

“Oh, hey, Kenny,” came the tired reply.

“You planning on staying long?”

“Only as long as it takes to come up with a brilliant idea.”

“And if you don’t?”

Jonathan thought about that for a few moments, then said “You can have my Red Sox tickets.”

Kenny smiled. “Jeez, now I don’t know what to root for!” he said as Jonathan turned back to his computer.

Three hours later, much to his surprise, Jonathan looked down at his computer and saw that he had, in fact, come up with a brilliant idea. Well, maybe not brilliant, but it was pretty damn good. Now all he had to do was put the plan down on paper in a way that would convince Gene to give him the go-ahead to execute it. Jonathan was surprised how easy that was, too, given his total lack of experience in the “big idea” department. But slowly the presentation was taking shape before him, and with each keystroke his confidence increased two-fold.

It was almost ten o’clock at night, now. Jon had been typing for so long that his hands ached. His eyes stung from staring at the computer screen. The cup of coffee he had gotten from the machine an hour ago was cold. Jonathan knew he needed a rest, and he allowed his hands to leave the keyboard, if only for a few minutes. He sat quietly with his eyes closed.

Except for Jonathan, the only other person in the building was a small, wiry man moving from cubicle to cubicle, emptying out wastebaskets into dumpster. Jonathan was grateful for the noise the man made. It was reassuring to know there was someone else in the building. When the man took his break a few minutes later, it got so quiet Jonathan swore he could hear the air swirling above him. The stillness was unnerving, and it made him long for the noise of an office filled with people.

The silence was suddenly shattered by the ringing of a telephone. Jonathan, jolted out of his reverie, picked it up and, after giving himself a moment to catch his breath—and curse himself for being such a wimp—spoke. “Hello. Hello? Hello?” he said into the phone until he realized he was speaking to a dial tone. Annoyed, he hung up the receiver and returned to the presentation on his computer.

Several miles away, in her bedroom, Mallory Bailey hung up the phone. She looked over at the clock on the night stand and saw that it was just a few minutes after ten o’clock. “It’s ten o’clock,” she said out loud to the bedroom, “do you know where your husband is?” She smiled as she turned off the light, with the answer clear and comforting, if not unusual. “Yes, I do. He’s at work on a big presentation.”

CHAPTER 7.

The Curse of the Bambino

It was the bottom of the ninth inning and the score was tied at two runs apiece. There were two outs and no one on base as the Boston Red Sox and their fans were looking for some late-game heroics. Jonathan Bailey was no stranger to these situations, and the crowd roared its approval as he swaggered out to the plate. As he banged the bottom of his cleats with his bat to remove clumps of mud he looked over the first base side and saw his father Alexander, his grandfather Theodore, and his great-grandfather Petra waving at him from their regular seats. He smiled at them and waved back, mouthing to them the words “over the wall, over the wall.” The crowd saw this and roared its approval as Jonathan stepped into the batter’s box and faced the Cy Young Award-winning pitcher with the nasty fastball who would do everything and anything to keep him from stroking another game-winning home run over the storied left field wall. With a grunt the pitcher released a nasty slider that—

“Good morning, Boston on this cold January morning. We’ve got more of your favorite tunes coming up—”

Jonathan’s fist slammed the top of the radio with a vengeance. Nobody has a favorite tune at this time of the morning, he realized. In fact, any tune they played right now would automatically become his least favorite. Sleep was still clouding his mind

and he struggled to stay awake.

“What time did you get in?” he heard his wife’s voice ask.

He struggled, through the fog, to come up with an answer. “Uhhh, about one thirty.”

“You must be exhausted. Let me make you breakfast.”

“Oh, gee, thanks.”

Mallory making him breakfast? Maybe he was still asleep. Jonathan actually thought about pinching himself but realized that was a bit too cartoonish, even for him. Then, without warning the fog lifted, the lights inside his head went on, and he remembered why he had gone to bed so late. The presentation for Gene. Jonathan leaped out of bed and hurried through his morning routine, stopping occasionally to listen, incredulously, to the sounds being made by Mallory in the kitchen downstairs. Mallory, his wife, making him breakfast. Maybe he should pinch himself, after all.

As he pulled into the parking lot Jonathan was still marveling over the small feast that had appeared before him on the kitchen table. Somehow the sight of Mallory busying her self in the kitchen with such a mundane task as preparing breakfast gave him an even stronger sense of purpose, almost like she was a part of his team, just like he was a part of Gene’s. Which, he mused, meant that Mallory was working for Gene. As he swiped his card through the front door of the Tennis. Net building he wondered what seat Mallory would take around the conference room table...

“Hey!” Jonathan heard a voice call out as he sped down the aisle to his cubicle. He stopped and backed up to the entrance to Kenny’s cube.

“Hey yourself.”

“I’m not going to ask,” Kenny said as sincerely as possible, even though they both

knew he was dying to know the answer.

Jonathan smiled and patted his computer carrying bag. “Took me until after midnight, but I think I got it.”

“Good luck,” Kenny said as Jon continued down the hall.

“Luck?” Jonathan replied with great bravado as he dropped his coat into his cubicle, turned around, and headed for Gene’s office, “I don’t know the meaning of the word.”

Across the hall, staring at Jonathan from his office, Brian whispered to himself, “No? You had better learn it soon.”

The presentation couldn’t have gone better. Instead of the critical hard-ass that Jonathan had imagined him to be, Gene was extremely supportive, even prompting Jon when he occasionally lost his place or got a figure incorrect. With each slide Jonathan’s confidence grew. So did the smile on Gene’s face. Before Jonathan realized it, the last slide was being projected on the screen and he was saying “and thank you for your time.”

“It was my pleasure, believe me,” Gene said with a smile. Then his face turned serious as he leaned forward. “Jon, you’ve been with Tennis.Net for how long now?”

“Uh, let’s see... about eight years, now, sir.”

“Eight years and seven months, to be exact. I pulled your personnel records yesterday. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Hey, it’s your bat. And your ball. In fact, it’s your ball field, too,” Jon said matter-of-factly, with not a shred of sucking-up intended.

“I suppose it is,” Gene laughed as he opened the file folder and began leafing through the papers stuffed inside. Jonathan watched his smile disappear. “I must say you

are a very consistent employee.”

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment, son.”

“Oh,” Jon said, suddenly embarrassed.

“The employee represented in this folder is a model of benign efficiency and banal reliability. In other words, duller than dishwater. You get the job done, son, but that’s about it. I suppose I could run a company stocked with nothing but Jonathan Bailey’s and make a profit. But you know what? That company wouldn’t last more than a few years before it suffocated out of existence. Now I’m not saying a company doesn’t need a whole mess of Jonathan Bailey’s working for it. I believe that we do, which is why you’ve lasted this long with this kind of record. But Jon, what you’ve presented to me this morning showed insight and thought and creativity and what I want to know is...”

Gene held up the file folder and waved it at Jon. “...where have you been for the past eight years and seven months?”

Jonathan was damned if he knew the answer, and from the expression of concern on his face that obviously bothered Gene.

“Ever take any marketing courses, Jon?”

“Sure. Back in college.”

“Me too. Took lots of them. Read lots of case studies which were supposed to show me why other companies failed or succeeded. And you know what I found?”

Jonathan instinctively knew that Gene was keen on answering his own question, and he stayed silent. “I found that all the degrees and all the case studies don’t guarantee a profit. The men and women who really made their companies successful were willing to do what others were not—take chances where conventional wisdom said they should not.

You follow me?”

The older man’s eyes seemed to be looking right through him. Jonathan cleared his throat. “I think, sir, what you’re saying is that after eight years and seven months you want me to give you a reason to take a chance.”

Gene sat up stiffly and held his head up so that when he looked at Jon it was literally down his nose. “So we understand each other?” he said ominously. Jon nodded.

They pressed him for details when he saw them a few hours later, but Jon didn’t say much to his friends about his meeting with Gene. Not because he had any self-doubt or because he feared what they’d say if he failed, but because the meeting had been so... personal. Jonathan was struck how Gene didn’t seem to be pushing an employee to do well for the company as much as he was pushing Jonathan—the individual—to succeed. *Or maybe, Jon thought, I’m kidding myself that a relative stranger could or would extend himself and that all it was just a good manager’s natural ability to make me feel that way.* In any case, he found himself becoming increasingly elusive the more Phil, Marie, and Kenny peppered him with questions, and their impromptu meeting ended somewhat strained, especially after Jon told them that he was going to miss lunch with them.

“Why come?” Kenny said. Jon opened his mouth to respond, then stopped, which of course just made Kenny all the more curious. “Come on, tell us. It’s the least you can do after you blow us off.”

“I’m not blowing you off,” Jon said defensively. “I just decided...” He paused again. “I just decided to hit the treadmill during lunch, that’s all.”

“You? On a treadmill?” Kenny said with eyes as wide as saucers.

“Hey, I’m getting older and I’ve got to take better care of myself, you know. The days when I could have a Big Mac and fries and simply sweat it off sitting through Calculus class are long gone,” Jonathan said, surprised at how defensive his own voice sounded. “Besides, the warm weather will be here soon and a nice jog at lunch might help me clear my head, you know.” He saw only blank stares from his three colleagues. “Look, I gotta go and get some stuff done, okay?”

“Sure,” Kenny said.

“Whatever,” Marie mumbled.

“See you later,” Phil added.

Jon smiled sheepishly and retreated to his cubicle. Kenny, Marie, and Phil just stood there for a few moments without saying anything. Finally, Phil broke the silence.

“Since when does Jonathan Bailey jog?”

“Look, everyone knows that Gene always invites the newest ‘Golden Boy’ to jog with him at lunch,” Kenny explained. “Jon’s just doing the smart thing and getting in shape so he doesn’t have a heart attack, that’s all.”

“Did you know I heard that Gene is sending him to the Valley to make the presentation?” Phil asked them.

“No shit,” Marie said. “Imagine. Jonathan on a business trip.”

“That must have been some meeting,” Phil mused.

“That must have been some presentation,” Kenny added.

“That must be some drug they’re putting in Gene’s coffee,” said Marie, and they all laughed.

“A business trip? You?”

Mallory and Jonathan had been seated at the kitchen table when Jon told her what had happened earlier in Gene’s office. The clanging of the utensils Mallory dropped onto the floor still reverberated in the kitchen. Jonathan smiled, reached under the table, and returned them to her plate.

“I’d like to get upset at your reaction but I have to admit it’s not much different than mine was,” he said.

Mallory laughed nervously. “I’m sorry, I’m really very proud of you, Jon. Really I am Congratulations.” She stopped and looked into his eyes. “It is congratulations, right? I mean, this is what you want, right?”

Jonathan looked deep into her eyes. “Mal, I never thought I’d hear myself say this, but yes, I do want it. I want it bad.”

“I never thought I’d hear you say that either.” *Jesus. Did I just say that, she thought? Why don’t I just take the knife and cut off his balls and finish the job?* She looked guiltily across the table at her husband. “I’m sorry, that didn’t come out the way I meant it.”

Now, after thirteen years, it was finally Jonathan Bailey’s turn. Without a trace of bitterness in his voice he looked into her eyes. “No, I think it did,” he said, as he got up from the table and left her alone in the kitchen to wonder how in one day they could go from lovers to supportive spouses to combatants in a steel cage death match, all in a single day.

The schedule of long hours, business trips and late-night meetings over the past few

months was grueling, especially for someone who had been content for so many years to sit quietly in a cubicle. But even though Jonathan was tired much of the time he still found his daily jog on the treadmill energizing, and he also wanted to be ready should Gene invite him on his well-known and coveted lunch-time runs.

Jonathan stepped onto a treadmill, glad that there was no one else in the in the company's exercise room because it meant he would have total control of the television set that sat on the makeshift shelf in the front of him. Jon liked to say that watching the television meant he could have the best of both worlds: he could exercise yet still be a couch potato. He flipped the main switch on the treadmill, and turned the throttle to increase the machine's speed until the room was filled with the low whine of the rubber belt against the metal base of the treadmill. Once he was up to speed (a number that he was proud to notice had increased since he began this lunchtime regimen) Jonathan pressed a button on the television's remote and began surfing.

Commercial. Click.

Soap Opera. Click.

Commercial. Click.

Rock Video. Click.

News. Jonathan stopped there. *I don't have any time to read the paper anymore*, he thought to himself, *might as well find out what's going on in the world*. On the screen, he saw a female reporter standing on a street somewhere in Boston. A street that looked oddly familiar to him, although he couldn't place it. Using the remote in his hand he raised the volume on the television just in time to hear the reporter say "in spring a young man—and woman's heart—turns to baseball, and in Boston that means the World Champion Red Sox." From behind her a cheer went up from a large crowd of people

gathered on what Jon suddenly realized was Yawkey Way.

The reporter continued. “The Red Sox report that season ticket sales were the best ever, despite another increase in the average price of ten percent they say is necessary to fund the construction of the replacement for Fenway Park.” That remark was followed by a smattering of boos and hisses from the crowd.

As his feet pounded the treadmill he watched as the camera pulled back to show that the reporter was standing in front of Fenway Park. He could see all the way up to the roof of the ballpark where several American flags flapped in the early spring wind. It was a sight that never failed to stir his memory, and as he looked at the old ballpark he could swear he could see a little boy and his father walking up Brookline Avenue heading for the ticket office. Just like Jonathan used to do with his-

“Damn it!” Jonathan screamed, so upset that he forgot where he was and stopped running. The treadmill, however, did not stop, and before Jonathan could do anything about it he was traveling five miles an hour—backwards. The next thing he knew he was on the floor. In front of him the treadmill, without his weight on the belt, began picking up speed, the whine of the out-of-control belt filling the room. Slowly, Jonathan picked himself off the floor and turned off the machine just in time to hear the in-studio anchorwoman say “Thanks, Stacey, for that live report from Fenway Park, the home of the World Champion Red Sox.” The anchor turned with a smile to someone sitting next to her at the anchor desk. “I just love saying that.”

“And I love hearing it,” the man sitting next to her replied. They both laughed. The chatter on the television continued as Jonathan sat on the floor, and brooded.

That’s where he was when Gene walked into the room about a minute later. “Jon, are you all right?” he asked when he saw him sitting on the floor next to the treadmill.

Jonathan picked himself up and said, with chagrin, “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Did you fall off that thing?”

“I... uh... yea, I guess I did,” Jonathan said, now completely red with embarrassment.

“Do you want me to call the nurse? Maybe you shouldn’t be exerting yourself like that...”

Christ, what a dilemma. Let Gene think that he was physically unable to take a simple walk on a treadmill or admit that he had gotten so upset at what he saw on the television that he had fallen off? His mind raced. Pride goeth before a fall, he had read in the Bible, but since he had already fallen down what pride did he have left, anyway? Might as well tell the truth. But, no, he thought again. What good could come of admitting that a television report had thrown him off balance like that? *I’ll make up some story about the treadmill being out of balance. Yea, that’s it.* He started to open his mouth when he saw in Gene’s face the kind of look of total pity one gave a child who had just fallen off a swing. It was too much for him to bear. He knew he would have to come clean.

“Are you a baseball fan, Gene?” Jonathan asked.

Gene looked totally confused. “I can’t imagine what that has to do with you ending up on the floor but yes, I’m a very big fan. In fact I have season tickets to the Red Sox. Had them since I was in my late twenties and could afford ‘em.”

“Good seats?”

Gene smiled broadly. “Good? First base side with a view of the Wall second to none. So close to the base path you can hear the sound of the runner’s cleats hitting the bag.”

This was going to be easier than he thought. Jonathan took a deep breath and started telling Gene about how every year Jonathan had made this holy pilgrimage to Fenway Park with his late father. How it didn't matter if it was raining or snowing or hailing cats and dogs, they went to the box office on the day it opened to buy Red Sox tickets. Death of a loved one? It didn't matter, either, because going to pick up that year's tickets was his family's way of affirming that life would go on.

"But this year I've just been so busy," Jonathan lamented. "Can you believe it? Of all the years to forget it has to be the year after they finally win the Series."

There was a look of deep understanding in Gene's face that made Jonathan feel a lot better. "I'm sure you'll get to a few games this year," Gene told him. "Tell you what, now that I know you're such a fan I'll make sure of it."

Jonathan was moved. "Thank you, sir."

"Do you feel better?"

"I do, thank you, sir."

"Then why the long face?"

"Oh, I guess I was just thinking about my dad and grandfather and how disappointed they'd be right now."

"Disappointed? Why?"

"I let them down. The one family tradition the Bailey's have had for all these years and I broke the link." Jonathan stopped speaking but to himself he continued the thought—*but what difference does it make anyway since it all ends with me and Mallory?*

"Do you regret taking on all this work?"

"No! Not at all," Jon responded as strongly as he could. "I guess it just kind of caught me by surprise."

“You mean that success comes at a price?” Gene said softly.

“I... I mean I never really thought about it like that, but yea, sure.”

“You’ve been hiding in that cubicle a long time, son. Welcome to the real world,”

Gene said as he patted Jon on the shoulder. “Now what do you say we get some exercise?” he said as he hopped on a treadmill. Jonathan nodded, hopped back on his treadmill, and together they watched the rest of the noon news as they walked to the whine of the machines.

“Congratulations, man, you must be flying,” Kenny was saying to Jonathan as Phil and Marie hovered at the entrance to his cubicle.

“To tell you the truth, I’m a little stunned,” he replied.

Marie wore a smile big enough for her and her friend. “Assistant Marketing Manager. Wow.”

Kenny seemed almost protective as he said “It had to happen, Marie, especially after that presentation Jon gave to the Corpus Christi people.” Then, to Jonathan, “I heard you blew them away.”

“Yea, it went very well,” Jon replied.

“Wait a minute,” Phil said, a look of confusing on his face. “Assistant Marketing Manager? We don’t have an Assistant Marketing Manager.”

“We didn’t until today. They created the position just for Jon,” Kenny said proudly. “Gene said something about being afraid to let someone of Jon’s caliber think there wasn’t a career path here.”

“Yea, that’s kind of what he said to me when he gave me the news,” said a clearly

stunned Jonathan.

“So have you told your wife?” Marie asked.

“No. Not yet. I can’t wait to see the look on her face when I tell her she’s sleeping with the new Assistant Marketing Manager for North America,” Jon said, smiling at what he figured would be a look of sheer surprise when he told her.

He wasn’t disappointed.

“Wow. I don’t know what to say,” Mallory said breathlessly when he broke the news to her several hours later in their bedroom.

“How about congratulations?”

“Congratulations, darling,” a subdued Mallory said as she kissed him gently on the cheek.

“What’s this? I thought this is what you wanted. A husband on the fast track?”

“Yes, of course it is.”

“And here’s the best part. The job is management so the pay rate is totally different. I’m an E-fifteen now. That means bonuses, stock options. It means everything you’ve always wanted Mal. In fact...” Jonathan held up one hand and reached into his jacket pocket with the other, and pulls out a folded piece of paper.

“What’s this?” she asked as he handed her the paper.

“Open it. Remember that house on Cape Ann? The one with the gables and iron gate that you always said you’d want if we had the money? I called a broker this afternoon. She said with my new salary and the market the way it is we could sell this pile of junk and have more than enough for a down payment.”

Mallory stared incredulously at the offer sheet. “This is all happening so fast.”

“No more arguing with windows, Mal. No more being ashamed of having your friends over for coffee...”

“Wait a minute, Jon, I was never ashamed,” Mallory said defensively. I just—”

“Now, now Mal, you were ashamed, and now I see why. We were being held back,, I recognize that now. But not anymore. Nope. Not anymore.” He moved towards her, and she closed her eyes in anticipation, but he brushed by her on his way to the closet, where he began flipping through his collection of suit jackets. Mallory opened her eyes and was embarrassed that her lips were still puckered when he was on the other side of the room.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting dressed. We’re going to the club tonight, remember?”

She got up and walked over to him, and wrapped her arms around his waist. “I know we were supposed to go, but I was just thinking that, you know, maybe we could stay home and, you know, celebrate.” Mallory accentuated the last word with a squeeze around Jonathan’s mid-section.

“And we will, I promise,” he said as he extricated himself from her embrace and continued his search for a suit. He continued to speak with his back to her as he shuffled the jackets on the rod. “But it’s important that I—we—be there, you know?”

Behind him, he heard Mallory sigh. He was touched to see how disappointed she was, and it caused him to stop what he was doing, if only for a moment. Quite a difference from the last time they had an invitation to the club and it was he who didn’t want to go. He walked up to her. “Mal, this invitation came from Gene personally.”

“I know, it’s just—”

“What?”

“Well, you’ve been working late a lot recently, and, well, I kind of miss having you home at night. You know, sitting at home watching TV...”

“You miss fighting over the remote?”

Jon had returned his attention to the suits in the closet, and turned around when she didn’t respond. He saw her nodding sadly, and shook his head. “Honey, I’m in management now. And that means that sometimes it’s not just about where we want to go, but where we have to go.”

Then Jonathan turned back to the closet and mumbled something about needing some new suits for another business trip and Mallory sat back on the bed, feeling very much like that little girl who had fallen through the looking glass.

Unlike last year, when an unexpected warm spell allowed the Mattapoissett Golf Club to serve drinks on the patio during its April function, an late snowstorm was keeping this year’s party indoors. Jonathan remembered how Mallory was so afraid of having a club member see their old car that she had him park in a far corner of the lot. *What would Mallory have done last year if it was snowing as it is tonight*, Jonathan mused to himself as he drove their new Volvo sedan to the front entrance of the club? Risk the embarrassment or a lot of snow and slush on her shoes?

I don’t have to worry about that this year, he thought happily as he got out of the new car he had purchased a few weeks ago, and walked around to the passenger door and handed his keys to an eager valet. Mallory had already begun to get out of the car by herself, and was surprised to see Jonathan’s hand extended in her direction. She grasped

it gratefully, at which point he pulled her up onto the sidewalk in a sweeping motion that caught her totally by surprise. She even more surprised as he placed his arm around her shoulders and guiding her gracefully towards the front door, which he opened with his free hand. Inside, Jonathan removed her coat and handed it to a young girl in the coatroom. He was in the process of taking off his own coat when he heard a voice calling out to him.

“Jonathan, old man! Over here!” He turned around saw Mark, the one with whom he had the encounter at last year’s function. Mark gazed back at him with awe. “Jon, man, how long has it been since we’ve seen each other? Jesus, you look great.”

“Hello, Mark. Thanks,” Jon said as he slapped his stomach proudly. “Been working out.”

“It shows, man, it shows,” Mark said with great enthusiasm. “Oh, hey, you remember Steve, don’t you?” Mark motioned to a well-dressed man standing next to him.

Jonathan couldn’t believe it. There was that obnoxious ‘if you haven’t moved up by now you’re going to die in your cubicle’ snot from last year. And here was Jonathan with a new job and an office. His mind started doing cartwheels. This was so great. How often in does anyone get an opportunity like this one? He extended his hand and with a sympathetic face and understanding tone said “Oh yes, you’re the poor fellow from the Cambridge Group who was stuck in that Director’s job for three years.”

The man cleared his throat, and Jonathan couldn’t have been happier to see how embarrassed he was at his memory of last year’s incident. “Yes, well... I’m Steve Walsh,” he said as he extended his hand, which Jonathan shook politely.

“I remember,” Jonathan said dryly.

“Well, from what Mark’s been telling me you’re the man on the way up,” Steve said deferentially to Jonathan. Mallory’s eyes sprang wide open.

“Well, I don’t know about that. I’m getting a few things done,” he replied modestly.

“Oh, knock off the aw shucks routine, Jon” Mark said, rushing to his side. “You’ve captured two of my firm’s accounts in the past month, alone, thanks to you.”

“Is that so?” Steve said, his eyebrows rising higher.

“It sure is,” Mark continued as Jon basked in the glow. “Jon has apparently found a whole new way of approaching perspective clients that lets them see the cost benefits of programs from their own perspective. It’s really remarkable. And successful... damn it all.” He added the last with a quick laugh.

“Is that so?” Steven studied Jonathan for a moment, then handed Mark his glass and said, as if he just got an idea that had come completely out of the blue, “Say, Mark, would you mind getting me a refill?”

“Oh. Sure,” Mark replied. “Jon, can I get you something?”

“No, I’ll wait until we sit down,” Jonathan replied, before turning to his wife.

“Mallory?”

Mark actually seemed surprised that she had been standing there all along. “Oh, hey Mallory, can I get you something?”

Mallory was not pleased that all that time had gone by without any recognition, and responded coldly, “No, thank you.”

“Well, I’ll be right back, then,” Mark said, oblivious to her icy stare, before turning and heading for the bar. Mallory watched as Steve made sure Mark was far enough way before putting his arm around her husband’s shoulder.

“So Jonathan, old man...” Steven said as he brushed by Mallory and guided him down the short hall and into the main dining room, “...how are they treating you over at Tennis dot net?”

Mallory stood alone at the entrance to the hall, furious at being abandoned, waiting for Jonathan to come to his senses and come back to get her, something she was sure he would do at any moment. As she watched Steve fawn over her husband like a love-crazed suitor (even holding Jonathan’s chair out for him) Mallory realized, with growing embarrassment, that her husband was having too much fun to notice what had happened to her. She sighed, and with slumped shoulders slowly made her way, alone, into the reception hall and to their table.

Close to the door, two couples who had been watching people make their entrances had seen Jonathan, Steve, Mark, and Mallory’s little drama unfold. They saw the dupe Mark being sent away on an errand, the confident and proud Jonathan being swept into the hall by the lothario Steve, and the slow march of the subdued and downcast Mallory. The effect was so striking that one of the women was compelled to turn to her companions and ask, in voice loud enough for Mallory to hear, “How did she ever get him?”

The question struck Mallory with the concussion of a thunderclap, and she felt herself going dizzy as she fell further down the looking glass. How desperately she wanted to believe that she would be able to maintain her composure as she staggered to the table and sat down. There was nothing for her to do but watch jealously as Steven fawned over her husband. She had never felt so ignored, so insignificant, so... so... turned on by the sight of her husband in such a commanding position. She shivered as an old, unfamiliar chill went down her spine. *My God, I want him so bad...* she thought.

Just two tables away, Jonathan's manager, Brian, was sitting with his wife. They, too, had seen the little drama play out, and while his wife saw only the slight to Mallory, Brian saw only opportunity. He anxiously scanned the dining room for a familiar head of white hair. And there it was! Brian excused himself, put on a sincere smile, and walked over to Gene's table. "Hello, Gene," he said in that overly-pleasant manner of his, as he extended his hand. "I was wondering if you had seen Jon Bailey yet?"

Jonathan Bailey, Tennis.Net's boy wonder, was feeling especially good as he stepped onto the treadmill to begin his daily jog, and it wasn't just because with no one else in the room he had autonomy over the television remote. As the belt under his feet began to pick up speed and he began his run, he realized that he was becoming pretty comfortable with this new life of his. Sure, the hours were long and the work hard, but for the first time in his life the reports and spreadsheets were all beginning to have a meaning beyond the bi-weekly paycheck. They were increasing skills he never realized he had. Skills that he knew were the foundation for further advancement, and the chance to make even more money. And—here was the biggest surprise of all—he was having fun!

Jonathan chuckled at that last thought. Having fun at work was something his father never thought was possible or even proper. There were no corporate ladders or invitations to country clubs or treadmills for the men on the line at Gillette, where his father toiled for over thirty years. Just work and lots of it, his father used to say.

"Mind of I join you?" a voice interrupted. Jonathan turned and was startled to see Gene chugging along on the adjacent treadmill.

“Oh, hi Gene. No not at all. Jog away,” Jonathan replied. “Is there anything special you want to watch?”

“How about we turn off TV?”

“Uh, sure, Gene. Do you want to go over the Corpus Christi presentation for next week?”

“No, let’s just talk.”

Jonathan turned off the television and looked to his left. The look on Gene’s face was startling. “Is there anything the matter, Gene?”

His boss seemed to be having trouble composing himself before speaking, which further raised Jonathan’s anxiety. “I like to think that this company is good to it’s employees,” he began. “Would you agree with that statement?”

Was this a trick question? “Of course I do, Gene,” Jonathan said sincerely. Gene didn’t appear satisfied with the answer or the way in which Jonathan gave it.

“I know it’s in vogue these days to jump ship the moment a better title or larger office or the chance for a few stock options comes along, but the problem with that tactic is that it ignores the long term benefits of sticking with one firm. Loyalty isn’t dead, at least not as far as I’m concerned. I respect a man who recognizes there’s probably no gold watch in his future, but thinks before he leaps. You follow me?”

Jonathan didn’t, but he nodded, anyway.

“Good,” Gene said, although from his expression Jonathan could tell he still wasn’t happy. The older man was silent, and for a while there was nothing but the whine of the treadmill belts filling the room.

“Gene?” Jonathan said tentatively, when he could stand the silence between them no longer.

“Yes?”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“I could ask the same thing of you,” Gene replied sternly. “Did I or someone at Tennis.Net do something wrong?”

“Of course not. You’ve been terrific.” Damn, he was confused.

“Exactly my point. So why would you want to leave?”

“Who said I wanted to leave?”

“Jon, I remember what a policeman once said to me when I tried to explain why I drove through a stop sign I was trying to claim I didn’t see. He said ‘son, don’t try to bullshit an old bullshitter.’”

“I’m not bullshitting you, Gene. I don’t want to leave.”

“All right, Jon, have it your way,” he sighed as he turned off his treadmill and stepped down onto the floor. “I guess as hard as I try I still don’t quite understand the way you young bucks operate these days. Maybe it’s time I did. I’ll say this much for you, Jon. For a guy whose been ducking a career for all these years you’ve sure caught on fast. I’d like to get upset but all I can be is impressed.”

“Gene?”

“Yes?”

“What are you talking about?”

Gene laughed quietly to himself, then reached up and put his hand on Jonathan’s shoulder. “I mean I got the message, son. I got the message,” and with that he left the room. Jonathan turned and watched him leave, wishing he had a clue what just happened.

Meanwhile, at the strip mall in Reading, the air was literally thick with hair spray, soy sauce, and conversation as Mallory held court to a very attentive audience. Francine, Mary Ellen, the manicurist, the cashier—in fact everyone in the shop—were glued to Mallory’s every word as she described the events of that morning.

“And after what happened this morning I just know something is wrong,” Mallory was saying.

“Because it wasn’t any good, huh?” Francine said sympathetically.

“No, that’s just it. He was... fantastic. I mean, my God, I’ve never experienced anything like it. We were at it so long he was late for work.”

“Oh. My. God.” Debbie said as she fanning herself wildly.

“I know, it was unbelievable” a flushed Mallory said.

“This is like, so incredible,” Mary Ellen repeated for what must have been the fifth time. “You made it seem like everything was so... boring in that department.”

“It was,” Mallory replied. “But something just came over me. Or him. Or us. I don’t know. We had gone to the club last night—oh, I can’t wait to bring you there it is so exquisite—anyway, the clock alarm had gone off this morning, and one minute I was laying in bed, watching him walk to the bathroom, and the next minute I was all over him.”

Debbie and Mary Ellen squealed like the high-schoolers they used to be. “You were all over him?” they asked at the same time, squealing again as they finished. Mallory just smiled and nodded, which of course led to another round of squeals.

“So what got you turned on?” Francine demanded. “You told us he’s been working out or something like that, right? Is he getting all hunky on you?”

“No, that’s not it. I mean trust me, his body is no better than it was a few weeks

ago. I don't know, maybe it was the way he swaggered when he walked—"

Francine held up her hand. "Wait a minute. Swaggered? Jonathan?"

"Yea, swaggered. What can I say? I saw him and all I knew was that I wanted him."

"And he responded, huh?" the manicurist asked.

"Did he ever."

On cue, Debbie and Mary Ellen squealed again.

"This is so cool. Did he like, use a new position or something?" Debbie asked.

"No, it was all pretty... you know, standard as far as that goes. But he did it with such... I don't know, confidence."

"Wait minute." Francine looked shocked. "First Swaggered. Now confidence? We're talking Jonathan, here?"

"I know," Mallory said as she fanned herself.

"That must be some drug they're putting in Jon's coffee, huh," Francine said, which made everyone in the beauty parlor laugh, even Mallory.

"So, how's the new Marketing Manager for North America doing, huh?"

"Oh, hi, Kenny," Jonathan said. "A little stunned, actually. I mean things have been going pretty well but I've been assistant manager for only three months."

"So how did the old man break it to you?"

That was a tough question to answer. Jon ran the events of the morning in his mind. He had just entered his cubicle when the phone rang and he was summoned into Gene's office. When he got there Gene looked anything but happy. Jon was prepared to hear the

worst when Gene just looked at him and, with no fanfare, told him he was now the manager of the department. Stunned, Jon seemed to recall stammering out a thank you and shaking Gene's hand. 'We don't want to lose you,' Gene had said. 'I don't want to be lost,' Jon had joked back, but the vice-president's face had remained grim and taciturn. Thanking him again, Jon turned to leave the office when he heard the Gene say 'I hope this takes care of that matter we discussed.'

Jon wanted to ask what matter that was, but Gene seemed so sure that he knew what he was talking about he didn't want to disappoint him. So Jon left. Left to pack up his cubicle for the big move, the one that every young corporate stud dreams about. The one that transitions him from a cubicle dweller to an office holder. A nobleman, of landed class. A real office with hard walls and windows and –

"So, you going to order new carpeting?" Kenny asked.

Jon snapped out of reverie. "Uh, gee, no, I don't think so. I mean Brian picked out a pretty nice color. And it's that nice, thick pile, too, you know?"

Kenny nodded his head. "Man, things are happening so fast around here. First Brian gets a promotion, then you get a promotion, then Brian gets another promotion and you get another promotion. What do you suppose is going on?"

"Get your score card, you can't tell the players without a score card," Jon said with a smile. He saw Kenny suddenly stiffen up. "What's the matter?" he asked, just as Gene appeared at his cubicle entrance. "Oh, hi Gene."

"Hello, Jonathan. Kenny." Gene looked around inside Jon's cube at the stacks of papers and half-filled boxes. "Looks like you still have some packing to do," he observed.

"Yes, I do," Jonathan replied as he looked at the mess he had created. "Although, it

seems so silly to be packing like this when I could just pick up most of stuff and carry it across the hall myself."

Gene held up his hand. "No, no, no, Jon. We've talked about this. You're a manager now. We have 'Building Services' to handle these tasks. Your time is more valuable to me and to the company. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good man," Gene said with a smile. "Now look, I just found out that I'm going to be stuck in a meeting with the finance department, so I'm going to have to skip lunch."

"Oh, sorry to hear that," Jonathan replied.

"Believe me, I'd rather go to lunch. But I'll see you at the game," Gene said as he took an envelope out of his breast pocket and handed it to him. "Here are your tickets."

"Thanks Gene," Jonathan called out to his boss, who was already on his way back to his office. He smiled when he saw the look of awe on Kenny's face.

"Are those what I think they are?" Kenny asked. Jonathan nodded, barely able to control the smirk.

"Wait a minute, let me get this straight. Gene just handed you a ticket to Opening Day?"

Jonathan said nothing. His smirk said it all. Kenny was practically breathless.

"You're going to opening day? You son-of-a-bitch."

"You know, there's just no respect for authority, these days."

"Opening Day, do you know what that means? You're gonna be there for the first Red Sox game since they won the World Series, man. You're gonna see them put up the World Series banner! Yaz, Rice, Eckersley, they're all coming back. This is like the hardest ticket in the universe to get and—what's this?" Kenny asked, distracted by

something Jonathan was holding in his hand.

“Gene gave me two tickets.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“No, I’m not.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Kenny looked as if he were going to cry.

“Say you’ll drive?”

“Are you kidding me? For Opening Day tickets I’d carry you on my back.”

Kenny was right when he said that a ticket to this opening day would be ‘the hardest in the universe to get.’ On this day the Red Sox and their fans would finally raise a World Series flag—their first since 1918—and, in doing so, exorcise the Curse forever. Who could begin estimate the begging, pleading, cajoling, and out-and-out bribery that must have taken place all over the region for tickets? As Jonathan and Kenny edged their way towards Fenway Park they looked like two nine-year-olds who had just uncovered a cache of their father’s Playboy magazines.

Even the drive into town had been a celebration, of sorts, as they listened to a subdued Guy Wayland tone down his usually obnoxious “everything Boston does is second-rate” act to the point where he was so acquiescent to his callers that Jonathan and Kenny found themselves squirming in their seats. It was like seeing the school bully giving back all the lunch money he had stolen. It got so bad they shut off the radio half-way to the ball park, preferring instead to bask in the glow of the upcoming game.

The game itself, a six run win by the Red Sox, was anti-climactic. It was, as Kenny had predicted, the pre-game ceremony that caused most of the excitement in the park.

The Red Sox spared no expense assembling as many former players on the field for the raising of the World Series Championship banner.

“There’s Luis Tiant!” Kenny said before the ceremony began, pointing to the field. “And Jim Rice and Carl Yazstremski...”

“And there’s the Monster, Dick Radatz, and Jim Londborg,” added Gene, who had arrived at the park just in time for the ceremony. “And there’s Johnny Pesky.”

Jonathan was in awe. “The Johnny Pesky? As in ‘Pesky held the ball?’”

Gene laughed. “What do you know about Pesky holding the ball?”

“I know my old man never forgave him,” Jonathan replied. “Just like Kenny and I have never forgiven Bill Buckner for letting that ball go through his legs.”

Gene smiled as he looked out onto the field. “Well, here’s your chance to tell him so.” Kenny and Jonathan looked in the direction where Gene was pointing, and there they saw him, standing near first base. Bill Buckner. *How ironic*, Jonathan thought, *that of all the places Buckner should be standing was first base*. It was at first base in Shea Stadium in New York that he committed the monumental error of his career, the one that lost the Sox their chance to wrap up the 1986 World Series and firmly cemented the notion of a Curse of the Bambino into New England’s psyche. And now, there he was, standing near the bag as if he had caught that ball and tagged out Mookie Wilson and saved the day for all New England. Jonathan couldn’t take his eyes off him.

The rest of the crowd was just beginning to catch on. Jonathan could hear the buzzing as people in the stands realized who was standing out there and they began passing the name from seat to seat and row to row. Soon the whole ball park was crackling with the news that Bill Buckner had returned. Jonathan waited for the boos. He waited for the jeers. He waited for the taunts. But that’s not what he heard.

From somewhere up in the stands it begin, spreading steadily and strongly up and down the aisles until it felt like the roof would come off of the old ballpark.

Cheers.

Cheers for the man who had single-handedly crushed the spirit out of a generation of New Englanders.

Cheers for the bandy-legged Gold-Glove winner who had chosen a chilly autumn night eighteen years ago to misplay a simple ground ball and place himself on the list of most-hated athletes—no, make that people in New England—of all time. And that list includes King George III and Albert DeSalvo.

Cheers, Jonathan realized, for a man who had served his penance and was now being granted a visa from Red Sox purgatory. And as the World Series Championship banner fluttered in air above Fenway Park Jonathan found himself cheering, as well.

Gene, Kenny, and thousands of others were now on their feet in a spontaneous demonstration of public forgiveness from the now-frenzied crowd. So close was Jonathan to the field that he believed he could actually see tears of gratitude begin to well up in Buckner's eyes. Jonathan felt tears begin to well up in his eyes, as well. Then, as Buckner turned to acknowledge fans in the rest of the ballpark, their eyes met. At first Jon thought he was imagining it. After all, there were 35,000 people in the ball park and it was ridiculous to think that Buckner should be looking into his eyes above anyone else's.

Then Jon felt it. An eerily familiar combination of anticipation, wonder, and dread slowly trickling down his spine.

Then Jon saw it. A smile spreading across the aging ex-first baseman's face. A knowing smile that was directed right at him.

And then, as quickly as it began, the moment was over. Buckner's gaze returned to the crowd as he waved his arm in a graceful wave around the ball park.

"Hey, Jon, are you all right, buddy?" he heard Kenny yelling into his ear.

Jonathan turned his head and saw deep creases of worry in Kenny's face.

"Yea, I'm fine. Why?"

"Man, you just had the strangest expression on your face," Kenny said. "You looked like you were a million miles away."

"Sorry. I guess I got caught up in the moment," Jon replied. The answer satisfied Kenny, who returned his attention to the field.

Now, Jon thought, if I could only get rid of this damn chill.

"I can't thank you enough for everything, Gene," Kenny was saying. The game had ended and he, Gene, and Jonathan were standing outside the ballpark as thousands of fans exited from the aging ballpark and swirling around them on the street, apparently too filled with the joyfulness of the day to leave.

"Happy to have you along, Kenny. But the credit for your invite goes to Jon, here. I just had the ticket."

"Well, it was awesome, Gene. Just unbelievable," Kenny gushed.

"Not a bad way to play hooky, eh?"

"Yea, and going with you meant we didn't have to pretend to be sick."

Jonathan playfully slapped Kenny on the side of the head. "Quiet stupid, you wanna give our secret away?"

They all laughed as the crowd surged around them. "Say, since you missed lunch

before the game, Gene, do you want to grab a drink with us?” Jonathan asked.

“I’d love to, but I’ve got a meeting to go to and then I’ve got to get ready for the analyst tour,” Gene replied. “I’m on a plane for San Francisco tomorrow and, well, you know the story.”

“I’m learning,” Jonathan replied. “Anyway, thanks again for the tickets.”

“Yea, thanks, Gene,” Kenny repeated, as Gene reached out and shook his hand. Then he grabbed Jonathan’s hand and took it firmly in his, placed his other hand on Jonathan’s shoulder, and smiled.

“We never thought we’d see this day, did we Jon?” Gene asked, still smiling, as he looked deep into Jonathan’s eyes. Jonathan, embarrassed over what was happening in front of Kenny, nodded his head. Gene looked up at the ballpark. “Too bad our old men aren’t around to share this—and everything else with us. I’m sure they’d be real proud.”

What must Kenny be thinking, Jonathan wondered. Probably that the old man wants to adopt me or something. Out loud he said “Thank you, sir. I had the same thought myself.”

Gene smiled, and with a wink to both Kenny and Jonathan, disappeared into the crowd. Kenny looked at his friend with a mixture of awe... and suspicion. “So, you and the old man getting along pretty well, huh?”

“Come on man, lay off me, all right?” Jonathan replied, clearly embarrassed.

“No, I think it’s great. Besides, you and I both know that if you weren’t getting the job done it wouldn’t matter if you were his own son.”

Jonathan knew that Kenny was right, but as they moved through the crowd, down Yawkey Way, and headed for the bar, he still found the thought a bit disquieting.

CHAPTER 8.

Seventh Inning Stretch

“So, what do you think?”

“I think considering how hard you’ve been working for them that this office is the least they could do.”

“Thanks, Mal, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Mallory was making her first visit to Tennis.Net since Jonathan had gotten the office. “Of course it was a compliment. You’ve been working very hard,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

Jon knew there was no arguing with her there. It had been two months, three business trips, and fifty-three Red Sox games since Opening Day and Jonathan was now firmly in control of the department in which just last December he was very a quiet and invisible member.

“Thanks,” he finally managed to say.

“So tell me the truth, Jon. Do you really like the job?” she asked as she leaned back on his desk.

He thought about it for a moment, then pursed his lips. “Well, like anything else it has its ups and downs.”

Mallory's eyes swept around the office. She looked at the mahogany desk, the high-end computer, the coffee maker, the refrigerator, the couch, and the plush carpeting underneath it all. She smiled at him. "It's obvious what the ups are," she began cautiously, not wanting to spoil the mood. "What are the downs?"

Jonathan took a deep breath. "Where do I start? Used to be I kept my head down and had to watch out only for my own mistakes. Now that I'm in charge of a department I have six people reporting to me and every one of their mistakes are now mine. That's probably the hardest thing to accept about this job."

"Well, you've never managed before. You'll get used to it."

Jon smiled. He was actually getting used to her public displays of confidence. "Thanks again. I think you're right. I will. It's just a little unsettling to know that I don't have complete control of my life."

"Did you ever?" she asked mischievously.

He laughed. "You're probably right. I was probably only fooling myself."

"Any other downs?"

He sighed. "You know I haven't seen a single Red Sox game from start to finish since that first game that Gene took me and Kenny to? I catch snippets of them playing as I'm racing through an airport or when I watch the taped highlights in my hotel room before I fall asleep. Of course this has to be the year they're something like 40 and 13 and in first place by like a dozen games." He had been pacing around the room and was now looking out of his window. From behind him he heard Mallory sigh. He turned around and saw her looking sadly in his direction. "Mallory, what is it?"

"Oh, nothing, I just... never mind," she replied, shaking her head.

Jonathan crossed the office to shut the door. Then he turned back and sat next to her

on the desk. “Mallory?” he said softly. She turned her head towards him, and seemed anxious to say something, but instead turned her head away.

“Mallory, please,” he pleaded as he reached out and touched her knee.

She turned to face him. “Aren’t there any more downs, Jon?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I was hoping maybe that a downside of all those business trips and late nights preparing your precious presentations would be that we don’t get to spend as much time together anymore.”

Jonathan was stunned at the hurt and anger in her voice. “Mallory, I... I honestly don’t know what to say. To keep this office and salary that goes with it means a lot of work.”

“But you’re enjoying all this excitement, aren’t you?”

“Well... sure.”

“You’ve even said that it’s even fun playing the corporate game.”

“It has its moments. But it doesn’t mean I wouldn’t rather be watching a Red Sox game.” He immediately realized he had done it again. “Or sitting with you watching television,” he added quickly. But it was too late. He knew it the moment the words left his lips.

“No, you don’t Jon. You don’t miss it because you never liked it.”

“That’s not true! I did. I liked it very much”

“You’d have rather been watching your ball game instead of being with me any night.”

“Don’t make it sound like I never wanted to be with you, Mal. Because I did.”

She was silent for a few seconds. “Why?”

“Why?” He groped for the words. “Because I love you,” he finally said.

“No you don’t.”

“Just a minute, Mallory, God-damn it. You know I hate it when you tell me how I’m feeling. Of course I love you. Why do you think I’m busting my ass in this job?”

“Because you like it. You just said so,” she replied as she got up from the desk and dropped herself onto the couch.

“I like the challenge. I like the excitement, sure. But what I really like is that I can give you all the things that you want, Mal.”

“But what if all I want is you?”

Jonathan fell backwards, almost falling on the floor, and threw up his hands. “You know, for years when I was working in that cubicle right across that aisle all I wanted was to hear those words from you. Instead, what I got was how I’m not living up to my potential, or how I’m too easy-going, or how miserable you were because the windows in our crappy home stuck.” He got up and walked to the window. “And now that I’ve responded just as you wanted, all you can do is complain. What do you want, Mallory? Once and for all would you tell me what you want!”

Mallory looked up at her husband, her bottom lip quivering and her eyes starting to fill with tears. Jonathan knew what was going to happen next but like someone watching an accident there was no time for him to do or say anything before impact. The next thing he knew she had burst into tears. He reacted as swiftly as he could, and within seconds he was at her feet, one hand on her shoulder, the other trying to pry her face away from her hands where they were now buried. “Mallory, please. Please stop crying.”

“Leave me alone,” she said in between sobs. “Just leave me alone.”

Jonathan stood helplessly as her shoulders heaved and her hands trembled and she gasped for air in between sobs. For a while, that was the only sound in the office.

Until he started to laugh.

He tried hiding his face in his hands and pretending that he, too, was sobbing, but he just wasn't that good an actor.

"What... what are you doing?" Mallory demanded. "Are you... are you laughing?"

"No," he tried to say in between bursts of laughter.

Mallory was crushed. "You insensitive son of a bitch. Why are you laughing?"

The insult was like a cold glass of water on his face. "I guess... I guess that this is one of those times where if I didn't laugh I'd start crying, too. Mallory, I don't know if this is about you and your... condition or if it's about me and how many hours I'm putting in or if this is about us and how we're trying to adjust to our new lifestyle or if it's something else entirely." Her hands were now away from her face and he cupped it with one hand and wiped her eyes with the other. "All I know is that I love you. Don't ask me why. You didn't marry a poet or a writer so I can't express it as well as I wish I could. I just know that I have ever since you spilled that daiquiri on me at Cheers during Game Six."

"Tequila."

"What?"

"It wasn't a daiquiri, it was tequila."

"Huh. And all this time I thought it was... It doesn't matter Mallory. The important thing is that it was you, and that's made all the difference in my life." Jonathan leaned forward and kissed her gently on the lips. The force with which her lips pressed back surprised him, but he quickly recovered and moved the hand which had been cupping her

face to behind her head, which he pulled towards him. Against his cheek her breath was coming quicker, now, and he felt his legs starting to weaken as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and began pushing him backwards onto the floor of his office. With surprising agility she slid off the couch, on top of him and onto the floor, her hips now grinding slowly against his.

Sheer momentum was taking them away, and as he rolled her over and began unbuttoning her blouse he saw Mallory lying there on the floor, her green eyes set against the maroon carpet, and he was very glad that Brian had chosen the nice, thick pile.

At that moment, outside the office, Gloria was about to knock on the door when she was abruptly stopped by Kenny. “I wouldn’t do that, Glo. Not now, at least.”

“But Gene asked me to get an important message to Jonathan,” she replied.

“Yea, but he and Mallory are in there and they’ve been fighting.”

“Really?” she asked as her eyes widened. “A big one?”

“I’m surprise you didn’t hear it on your side of the building.”

Gloria cocked her head towards the door. “Sounds awfully quiet in there now,” she said.

“Probably taking a breather. Why don’t you leave the note on the door? I mean what could be more embarrassing than walking in on a man and wife having a fight?”

“I can’t imagine.”

Meanwhile, inside the office, the thick, plush carpeting was doing its job...

It was a few weeks later, and Jonathan was on another business trip, when Mallory decided the new house was in good enough shape to invite her friends over for a visit. It

was supposed to be a triumphant moment for her as she guided her old high-school friends on a room-by-room tour of her well-furnished Victorian home on Cape Ann. But the day wasn't going as expected.

Debbie, Mary Ellen, and Francine were happy enough to see their old friend in a house she was finally proud of. They patiently cut her slack even after the fifth time she asked if any of them could guess how much the credenza in the living room cost or after the fourth time she quizzed them on which country they thought the imported dining room table might have originated.

"I'm telling you girls, when I think of the time I spent in that old kitchen arranging and re-arranging my pots and pans after each use I can't believe it. I mean there's just so much room here to play with. The other place was smaller but just so much more work to clean," Mallory was saying. But the girls weren't listening.

"You know, Kenny tells me that Jonathan is practically Gene Walker's right-hand man, now," Mary Ellen said to the others.

"Who's Gene Walker?" Debbie asked.

"Only the vice president in charge of marketing. He's like everyone's boss over there," Mary Ellen explained. "Kenny says that since the end of last year Jonathan has, like, taken over the whole department."

"What's his title now, Mallory?" Francine asked.

"Oh, uh... Marketing Manager for North America." Mallory turned quickly to her other two friends. "Mary Ellen... Debbie... did I show you the inlay in the upstairs bathroom tile?"

"He's the manager now?" Debbie said incredulously. "How wonderful for him."

"Yea, it's great," Mallory said, squirming in her seat as conversation about Jonathan

swirled around her. How Jonathan was Tennis.Net's newest golden boy. How Jonathan had re-invented the company presentation and in doing so had brought in more business in four months than the previous two occupants of the office had in a year. Jonathan, Jonathan, Jonathan. *Enough about him, already. They should be talking about me.*

"Jonathan and I had sex in his office."

Silence.

Debbie looked at Mary Ellen. Mary Ellen looked at Francine. Then Francine looked at Mallory.

"You and Jonathan did what?"

"We had sex. In his office. On the carpet."

"You did it on the floor of his office?" Debbie asked. Mallory nodded her head and Debbie and Mary Ellen suddenly let go with a high-school squeal as they fanned themselves wildly. Francine just smirked. Mallory smiled. She was back in control.

"Oh my God, Mallory," Mary Ellen said, a look of amused shock on her face.

"When did this happen?"

Mallory thought for a moment. "Wednesday of last week."

Mary Ellen gasped.

"What is it?"

"I just remembered that when Kenny came home that night he told me you had visited Jon's office that day, but he said that you two were having this monster fight. In fact," she said as she leaned forward, "he said there were people trying to get in to see Jon but Kenny stopped them because it sounded so bad."

Mallory saw Francine's superior smile and cursed the fact that Mary Ellen's husband worked in the same office as Jonathan. Damn. Now she was going to have to

come clean about the whole day.

“All right. There was something going on,” she said as if it were old news. “But it wasn’t like a fight at all. It was more like a discussion.”

“Discussion, huh?” smirked Francine, enjoying the unraveling of Mallory’s tale.

“About what?”

“Oh, you know, how Jon’s been working a lot of hours and going on a lot of business trips and how we don’t get to see each other as much anymore,” Mallory replied, seizing the opportunity to shift the focus back to her. “You know, when you’re used to spending so much time with someone and suddenly they’re away a lot, it can be hard.”

“Well, I can see how you’d be upset,” Francine smirked. “After all, you can’t bitch out at him if he’s not here, can you?”

Mallory could not believe what Francine had just said. “How dare you!” she screamed.

“How dare me? How dare you,” Francine snapped back, as Debbie and Mary Ellen just watched with wide eyes and open mouths. “Do you really you can get away with this ‘supportive wife whose been standing by her man’ bit? You can knock off the Tammy Wynette act, Mallory. We’ve been through too many lunches and hair appointments when your only contribution to the day consisted of you telling us about all of Jonathan’s shortcomings for us to believe any of this.”

“You have no right to say that to me,” Mallory shot back.

“I have every right. I’m you’re friend,” Francine replied.

“Some friend.”

“Mallory,” Francine said with sudden gentleness. “You can’t have it both ways.

You've got to decide which Jonathan you want.”

Francine and Mallory just stared at each other now. Debbie and Mary Ellen shifted in their chairs. Above them all, Uncomfortable Silence hovered. It had found, to its delight, that the home could be just as friendly as the office.

The girls all left shortly after that, claiming suddenly-remembered appointments and after-school pick-ups, although Mallory was sure that Francine, Mary Ellen, and Debbie were really going someplace else to talk about her. Now it was now past eleven at night and she was sitting alone in her new living room on her new couch, looking ambivalently at the new recliner chair, which was next to the Louis XIV reproduction table on which sat the Tiffany lamp when, through an open window she heard the sound of Jonathan's car pulling into the driveway.

The car windows were open, and she could clearly hear the radio tuned to the sports station. The announcer's voice cut through the thick, night air, "...and so the Sox lose a tough one in eleven innings by the score of three to two and drop out of first place for the first time since September of last year when they began their remarkable run towards their first World's Championship in eighty—" The radio shut off and the car door opened. She listened to the crunching of gravel under Jonathan's shoes as he walked to the trunk of the car, removed his suitcase, and walked in the front door.

"Hey Mal! What a nice surprise," Jonathan said as he opened the door and saw his wife. "I thought for sure you'd be in bed." He dropped his suitcase at the door and walked over to the couch, where she sat, and leaned over to kiss her. "It was a another great trip, Mal. I knocked 'em cold. Gene said with this deal we could very well double our billings for the year. So whatcha doing?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing," she replied ambivalently. "You know, just sitting here looking

around at the house and everything.”

Jonathan stood there and proudly put his hands on his hips. “I know how you feel. I do it to, sometimes.” Mallory didn’t say anything, she just looked at him blankly. Oblivious to her mood, he continued. “Sometimes I’ll just sit here and gaze at everything we’ve gotten over the past year. Bet you’d never thought you’d be living in a home like this, huh? Come on, admit it.”

She rolled her eyes. “Jonathan, we’ve been through this before. I told you that I always knew you had the potential,” she said mechanically with as much enthusiasm as she could muster at that moment.

He leaned down and cupped her face paternally. It was a condescending move that Mallory had come to hate. “But you never thought I’d reach it. Now don’t try to deny it, baby, because I know it’s true.”

Mallory rolled her eyes. *Baby? He’s calling me baby now?* she muttered to herself. Jonathan swaggered around the room and patted his flat stomach through his shirt with a self-assured thump as he surveyed his little kingdom. This wasn’t Alice through the looking glass anymore, Mallory realized, this was a trip through hell. Then she watched as Jonathan scowled and walked over the front window. “How come this window is open?” he asked her annoyed.

“I don’t know... There was a nice breeze outside and so I opened the window.”

“Mallory,” Jonathan said as he began to tug on the window, “you’ve got to keep the windows closed when you have the air conditioning on, or else...” Mallory watched as he struggled to close the window, his face beginning to turn red from the strain. “Or else...” he repeated again, his arms straining against the window.

“Jon, are you all right?”

His response was sharp and condescending. “Everything would be fine if you’d just leave the—God-damn it—leave the windows alone.” He gasped for air as he released his grip on the window, and stood back to catch his breath. Jon stared malevolently at his nemesis for a few seconds before grabbing it again and pushing downward. A primeval grunt filled the room as his whole body began to shake from the strain. Suddenly, the window gave way and raced to the sill where it slammed to a halt. But, thanks to several laws of physics, Jonathan’s body kept going. The next thing he knew he was on the floor, gulping for air like a grounded fish, with Mallory at his side.

“Stupid... windows...” he croaked in between gasps for air. “They’re not... supposed... to stick... like that.”

Mallory looked down at her husband and then up at the window. As she sat there, stroking his cheek and offering words of sympathy, she couldn’t help smiling—just a little bit— at a familiar, comfortable feeling coursing through her veins.

It was now July, just a few days after the All Star break, and things were not going well for the home town team. The fans’ frustration was summed up by Boston’s favorite sports columnist, Don Mulligan, who wrote a column that went like this...

RED SOX COME DOWN TO EARTH

The Streak. Perhaps no element of the game of baseball draws as much attention than when a player or team performs above and beyond accepted statistical boundaries. In a sport where hitting just once per game for more than three or four games in a row is worthy of note, how was it that in 1941

Joe DiMaggio could hit safely in 56 games in a row? Or in a sport where hitters so dominate pitching that a complete, nine-inning shutout gets a pitcher headlines in sports pages around the country, how could Orel Hersheiser have shut out the opposition for 59 innings in 1988—the equivalent of over six games in a row? And in a game where, given the grind of a 162 game season, team winning streaks of six or seven games is unusual, how is it possible that the 1983 Baltimore Orioles—on paper a good but not a great team—could go unbeaten in their first 21 games of the season?

The mathematicians might express it in some quadratic equation and tell you that such occurrences represent the far end of a bell curve. The psychologists would speak of the power of positive thinking. Physiologists would lecture on the effects of adrenaline on the human body. But ultimately they would all fail, for the very reason that baseball—or any sport, for that matter—is so compelling, is because it is impossible to predict how the combination of players, the field conditions, the weather, time of day, phase of the moon, and what the umpire had for breakfast will affect the outcome of the contest, or how a team or individual could do what only yesterday was considered impossible.

The Red Sox had been in such a zone since last summer, outperforming every pundits' pre-season predictions with a show of baseball might that pushed them way outside the mathematicians bell curve and into baseball legend. Some credit last August's bolt of lightning with the late-season surge that ended with the Red Sox capturing baseball's ultimate prize—no doubt the same mystics who burned incense and chanted Wiccan prayers attempting

to exorcise the now-deceased “Curse of the Bambino.” Then again, after what we have seen what is passing for baseball at Fenway Park these days, maybe I shouldn’t be so harsh.

After witnessing their tumble from first-place heaven to fourth-place hell (for you kids out there who think this is the greatest job in the whole world consider the fact that yours truly had to sit through every inning of each and every one of those stinkers), I believe now perhaps what the Red Sox need is a good exorcism. Or maybe a good mathematician. Because what we are seeing is the opposite of the streak—it’s the slump. We don’t need Stephen Hawking to explain that there are two sides to the bell curve, one where you exceed expectations and the other, where you fall way below them. And the Red Sox are sitting on the wrong end.

Guy Wayland finished reading the column and laid the paper on the console, staring at it with a scowl. Not that he didn’t agree with Mulligan—he certainly did. What was frustrating was that he knew most Red Sox fans felt the same way. Which meant that his phone lines should be burning up with angry callers demanding the head of the general manager or the third base coach or even the firing of the hot dog vendors. So why, why, why weren’t they calling? He looked at the call-in phone, and saw only one line blinking. On the other side of the glass standing against the back wall, he could also see Joe Murphy, the station manager, scowling.

The commercial break over, Guy flipped a switch that turned on his microphone. “Welcome back to the Guy Wayland program,” he said, trying to sound as casual as possible, yet unable to stop glancing at Joe Murphy and the ominous expression he was

wearing. “Let’s take a call—” Damn it. Guy watched the one remaining light on his phone flicker out.

“Well it looks like whoever was going to talk to me as lost their nerve. Well, how about it, folks? Where are the faithful to tell me that it’s only three losses in a row since the Sox’ last win? Where’s my buddy Ray from South Boston to remind me that it’s only July? Carlos from Chelsea, Anne from Dover, where are you guys?” Guy looked hopefully at the producer, who held up his hands helplessly. A big bead of sweat started to trickle down Wayland’s puffy face. “See, this is the kind of lousy fan loyalty...” Guy started to say as he drummed his fingers on the console. “You know what? You people don’t deserve a World Series champion, how about that?” Nothing. The phone just sat there bereft of lights. He swallowed hard. In the producer’s booth he thought he saw Joe burying his head in his hands.

“Okay, how about this? Your team sucks! What do you think about that, Boston?”

Apparently, Boston didn’t think about it at all. Had this been a cartoon, the sound of crickets would have been heard coming from the radio.

Joe Murphy looked into the broadcast booth at what was once was a ratings juggernaut but was now a quivering mass of confusion and frustration. He shook his head sadly, and walked out of the booth.

Jonathan was having one of ‘those’ days. One of those the-newspaper-didn’t-get-delivered, I-spilled-coffee-in-my-lap-because-the-car-hit-a-pothole, and I-just-got-a-huge-paper cut kind of days even the President of the United States gets every once in awhile. Because not even the best spy satellites or highly trained Secret Service agents

could prevent the leader of the free world from getting a paper cut—although the image of three agents wrestling a piece of paper to the ground was pretty funny.

Anyway, that's what Jonathan was thinking about as he stared at the stack of incomplete reports that had been sitting on his desk for the past week. He sighed as he found himself wishing that there were another business trip to go on. This, despite the fact that after several flight cancellations, innumerable flight delays and occasional run-ins with surly airline employees the glamour of traveling had begun to evaporate. *It would be nice to get away from all these reports, though*, Jonathan said to himself as he began trying to formulate a reason to visit somebody, anybody who was some place that wasn't here. He was starting to get excited about the prospect of another road trip. Then he remembered something Gene said to him a few weeks ago.

“Perhaps we should give you a rest from the road, Jon. I think you need to concentrate on managing your team back here at the office.”

That was bad enough, but what really hurt was that Gene said it at a staff meeting for everyone to hear. Two weeks later and Jon was still trying to figure out which bothered him more, Kenny, Marie, and Phil averting their eyes from his, or the unmitigated glee in Brian and Neil's faces as they looked right at him.

And now, Jon had another problem at the other end of the phone.

“I've already made the date with Francine, Mary Ellen, and Debbie,” Mallory was saying over the phone. “When is Gene going to bring them in?”

She was talking about four guest passes to the health spa at the Mattapoisett Club which Gene had offered to Jonathan a week ago, but had yet to bring into the office.

“Have you asked him when he's going to bring them in?”

“The time hasn't been right.”

“You better make it the right time because if I have to cancel this day after making a big deal to my friends about the club –”

Just then the door opened and Gene entered. “Hello Gene,” Jon said as he cupped the mouthpiece of the telephone. “I’ll be off in just a second.”

Gene held up his hand and waved his hands. “No rush,” he said softly, as he turned and shut the door behind him.

“Is that Gene? Does he have the passes?” he heard the muffled voice of his wife ask through the phone, as he watched his boss stroll to the couch, where he picked up the sports section of the *Globe* and looked at the headline: SOX LOSE FIFTH IN A ROW, FALL TO FIFTH PLACE.

“Look, I gotta go,” Jon said into the phone.

“Jon, don’t forget to ask him about those passes. Jon, are you listening to me?” came the plaintive voice over the phone even as the receiver was being placed in its cradle.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Gene said.

Jonathan could taste the tension in the air. “No, that’s okay, Gene. My office, your office, right?” He paused, waiting for a laugh that never came. “What can I do for you?”

Gene sat down on the couch. “I don’t want to make a bigger deal out of this than it needs to be, Jon...” His voice trailed off at the end of the sentence as he looked again at the paper and sighed.

“But...?”

Gene sighed again, and for a moment Jonathan thought that maybe his boss was upset because of the Red Sox’ losing streak.

“You were supposed to have your quarterly report on my desk by noon yesterday,”

Gene said. No such luck.

“Gene, I’m sorry. I was waiting for some data from Jeff in accounting and—”

“Damn it, Jon, one of the things you’ve got to learn as a manager is not to let your lieutenants dictate your schedule.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re the boss, not them.”

“Yes, sir.”

“If they can’t meet your needs then maybe we need to find something else for them to do, right?”

“Right.”

“Good man,” Gene said as he nodded officiously. Jonathan watched him cast one more glance at the newspaper before turning to the door.

“Hey Gene,” he called out. Gene stopped and turned to face him.

“Yes, Jon?”

Jonathan looked at his boss, then at the stack of papers on his desk, and realized this was a bad time to ask about those passes to the club. “Nothing. Never mind.” Gene just stared at Jon for a few moments, then at the headline in the paper, before turning and exiting the office. Jonathan swore he could hear Gene sigh.

CHAPTER 9.

Be Careful What You Wish For...

Be careful what you wish for, it might come true.

The old expression popped into Jonathan's head as he sat in his office around midnight preparing for the business trip he had so desperately wanted and, after much prodding, gotten. At first, he was thrilled for the chance to escape his paper-bound hell. Now, a week later, as he looked at the stacks of computer printouts resting precariously on the couch, the financial calculations scrawled on a white board, and the spreadsheets taped to the wall, he realized how painfully dead-on that expression was.

Meanwhile, around the room, Kenny, Neil, Phil, Brian, and Marie sat on unoccupied pieces of the floor helping him piece together a presentation. It looked, Jonathan mused, like a bunch of accountants having a slumber party.

Jon was sitting behind his desk at the computer, typing in the data his colleagues were feeding him, desperately trying to concentrate on what they were saying, but the late hour combined with the tedium of all those numbers being lobbed at him were causing his eyes to wander from the screen. As he swept around the office, he noticed that there was one patch of maroon carpeting still visible under the stacks of spreadsheets—the very spot where, a month ago, he and Mallory had “christened” his office. He found

himself being aroused by the memory, and he began to picture himself there, on the floor, with his wife as they got caught up in the danger and excitement of their office-bound encounter. Jonathan could taste the beads of sweat that had formed on her neck as he—

“Hey Jon!”

He mentally threw on his clothes and opened his eyes to see Brian standing before him with several spreadsheets in his hand. “How about it? What do you want to do?” Jonathan was frozen with embarrassment. “Since you obviously weren’t listening,” Brian sneered, “I’ll ask you again. Are we going to include projected data for F-Y-zero-five, or is that pushing it?”

“And John, is it okay to use the click-through rate as background, or do you want the purchase data that’s a lot more verifiable?” he heard Phil ask.

Marie was quick to jump in, as well. “As long as you’re making decisions, I could really use some help with the positioning statement on slide three.”

Jonathan didn’t say a word, he just sat there looking like the proverbial ‘deer in the headlights.’

Kenny stood up and negotiated his way around the piles of paper and leaned over the desk. “Look, Jon, I know it’s late, but we’re all tired but we really need some direction here.”

Jonathan rubbed his eyes, stood up, and walked past the papers and the spreadsheets and the whiteboard until he was at the window, where he stood and looked at the view for a few seconds. Then he turned around, and through the open door he caught sight of it – just across the aisle – his old cubicle. Jon froze in place, just staring at it.

“Hey Jon?” This time it was Marie. “Jon, are you all right?”

Jonathan blinked. “Yea, I was just thinking, I guess.”

Suddenly he heard Brian's agitated voice. "This is getting ridiculous. Are we going to get some work done around here because if we're not I'm just going to go home."

"All right, Brian," Marie said, sounding a bit agitated herself. "It's late for everyone, okay?" Then she turned, and asked softly "Jon, what is the matter?"

Jonathan sighed. "Oh, I was just thinking about how much simpler the view was from over there."

"God-damn it!" Brian exploded. "I didn't stay here until practically midnight to listen to this crap. Listen, pal, you don't like the office or the responsibility that goes with it? Fine. I don't really care one way or the other. But don't drag the rest of us down with you, okay?" With that, Brian turned to leave with what would have been a very dramatic exit, had he not tripped and fell face first over a pile of printouts stacked near the door.

With all the dignity he could muster, Brian picked himself up and, without looking back, exited the office and walked down the aisle.

Jonathan, who just a few seconds ago had been dressed down—one might even say called on his own carpet—by a fellow employee, desperately tried to stifle a laugh. But when he looked down and saw Kenny, his shoulders heaving and tears streaming down his cheeks from behind his hands that were clasped over his face, Jon lost it, as well, letting loose with a burst of laughter that triggered Marie, Phil—even Neil—into uncontrollable fits of laughter that echoed throughout the empty office.

As the three-day Labor Day weekend approaches, thousands of New Englanders hit the roads for Cape Cod, Maine, and New Hampshire. And they do so with a great sense

of urgency. For weeks they have been watching the leaves beginning to change color, a constant reminder, albeit a pretty one, that the days will quickly get shorter and colder and another winter will soon be here. Labor Day is also when New Englanders engage in another tradition: spending copious amounts of time complaining about the Red Sox who, like the autumn leaves, have by this time usually fallen, often from a first-place perch on top of the baseball tree, to the ground.

So these phone lines should be burning up, Guy Wayland thought as he looked at the lifeless instrument in front of him. Here it was the beginning of September and the Red Sox were dropping like a stone. What could be better for a sports talk show host in Boston? Nothing, that's what. So why wasn't anyone calling?

He recalled fondly how last year at this time, when the Red Sox were on their way to the World Series, the phone lines burned with the primeval angst of Sox fans. It could be the morning after their team walloped the competition, but all his callers would want to talk about would be a late-inning replacement by the manager that they feared signaled the end of their hopes for October.

Those truly were the days, Guy mused. He and the station manager had become best friends, back then. There wasn't anything Joe Murphy wouldn't do for him. A free car. Free furniture. Trips. But that was a very long year ago. Today, through the glass, leaning against the back wall of the producer's booth, he could see Joe Murphy staring at him, and even though he was in front of him Guy swore he could feel the Joe's breath on the back of his neck.

Despite the grim sight of the empty telephone, Guy had a new-found confidence that he had found the solution to his ratings woes, and he was anxious to put his plan into action. Through his headphones he heard the producer's voice advising him that the

commercial break was almost over, and he shifted his enormous mass forward, his mouth barely touching the microphone. The "ON AIR" light blinked on, and he took a deep breath.

“Welcome back to the Guy Wayland show. Let’s cut to the chase, people. You want to know why the Sox are in fifth place? The answer is obvious. It’s not the line-up of this year’s team, because essentially you have got the same line-up that won the World Series just one year ago. Except for one player. Second baseman Manny Gutterez, who your team sold to the New York Yankees just a week after the Series ended. Now let’s look at his stats. Manny has batted in 32 runs and is hitting almost three hundred for the Bombers. So once again the Red Sox have sold an all-star player to the New York Yankees. Once again the Yankees are in first place with a former Red Sox player as a big reason for their success. And once again the Sox are paying the price for their short-sightedness with a dismal season. Well, come on? Don’t you see what this is? It’s the Curse of Manny Gutterez!”

Guy looked hopefully at the phone. Nothing. Inside the producer’s booth he saw Joe walking out of the studio, shaking his head. “What is with you people?” Guy said, the panic rising in his voice. “Your team is dropping like a stone! You’re supposed to be angry! You’re supposed to be upset. Come on, doesn’t anyone give a shit anymore?”

At some point in our lives we’ve all said something we regret. Tragically, for Guy, that something was said live on a 50,000 watt radio station. He clasped both hands against his face in a futile attempt to stuff the words back inside his mouth. He looked through the glass and saw the producer, his eyes wide with fright, staring back at him. The "ON AIR" light went off and in his headphones he now heard an announcer’s voice—on tape—saying “Ladies and gentlemen, please stand by while we correct a

problem with our broadcast signal.”

Guy was confused. “What’s the matter with you? Why didn’t you hit the delay button?” he asked, sounding annoyed.

The producer calmly leaned forward and spoke into the intercom. “Uh, Guy, we weren’t in delay.”

“Not in delay? Why weren’t we in delay?”

“I told you an hour ago that since you weren’t getting any phone calls the engineers took the delay unit out for maintenance. You’ve been live the whole time.”

“Live?”

“That’s what no delay means.”

Guy sat back in his chair, ashen, and wiped his brow. “What the hell…”

“Hey, it was only supposed to be a problem if we were taking calls,” the producer said. “I never expected I was going to have to bleep the host!”

At that instant the door to the booth swung open. It was Joe Murphy, so angry his whole body was shaking.

In the studio, Guy had turned white.

In the booth, the producer gripped the console and held his breath, waiting for the blast. But the enraged general manager simply looked at him and said, in a surprisingly calm voice, “Would you have Guy see me when he gets off the air?” Then, as quickly as he entered, he turned and left the booth.

The producer exhaled and released his grasp of the control board. He pushed the button for the studio intercom. “Joe says—”

“Yea, I know,” Guy said, as he dropped his head into his hands and sobbed.

Jonathan never made the business trip. Brian had arranged to ‘accidentally’ bump into Gene in the cafeteria the next morning so that he could describe, in excruciating detail the long, fruitless night before. Depressed, Gene had returned to his office and reviewed the results of his Pygmalion experiment. It wasn’t a total failure, he consoled himself. After all, Tennis.Net had quite a few new accounts and several contract extensions thanks to Jonathan. But he had to admit to himself that lately his prodigy hadn’t been performing very well. In fact, his presence on the management team was beginning to place several accounts in jeopardy. Gene was beginning to feel pressure from his own superiors and he knew that something would have to be done. He was about to ask his secretary to call Jonathan when there was a knock on his door.

“Yes?” he called out. The door opened and Gloria peeked inside.

“Jonathan Bailey is here and wants to know if you have a free moment?”

“By all means, send him in,” Gene said as he leaned back in his chair, wondering if perhaps Jonathan had heard about the talk with Brian and was planning some kind of defense. He hoped so. He truly believed in Jonathan, and wanted to see his own Eliza Doolittle fight back. *This might be the very thing to bring put him back on track.*

But Jonathan wasn’t there to fight about anything. Today was the day Mallory had arranged to spend at the spa with Debbie, Mary Ellen, and Francine and with his back up against a wall, Jon was left with no choice but to go to the vice-president’s office to ask about those stupid passes. But Jonathan was no good at asking for favors.

Gene was worse at waiting for someone to start a conversation. “You want to explain to me about last night?”

Momentarily stunned, Jonathan, to his credit, recovered quickly. “You spoke with Brian, right?”

“I did. From what he tells me you didn’t have the most productive of nights.”

“Well, now, I wouldn’t say that, sir.”

“Is the presentation ready?”

“Well... no, but —“

“Then what the hell were you doing here till all hours of the night?”

“Sir, there’s a lot of information that needs to be collated and processed in order to put together the most—”

“Come on, Jon, don’t bullshit me. Brian showed me the draft and you didn’t even use any of the data from the client’s own year-end report. What’s the use of visiting a prospective customer and doing the research on them if we don’t show them that we know anything about their business?”

“You’re right. You’re right.”

“Brian was pretty annoyed this morning and quite frankly, I can’t blame him.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

Gene took a deep breath. “So what did you want to see me about?” he asked, as Jonathan fidgeting before him like a child.

“See you? About?”

“Yes. You came to see me, remember? You wanted something?”

“Want? Oh, I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am, Gene, about last night, I mean. It won’t happen again, I promise. You’ll have that presentation in no time,” Jon said as he slowly backed out of the office.

“See that I do,” Gene sighed, and before he realized it, Jon had backed all the way out of his office and shut the door before he could say anything else.

Jon was in a hurry to get back to his office. Not to finish that report, but to make a

phone call that Mallory would not get.

Just about the time that Jon was frantically dialing the phone, Mallory was strutting to the entrance to the Mattapoisett Country Club with her three friends close behind her.

“Mallory, this is so great of you,” Mary Ellen said for what must have been the fifth time that morning.

Mallory smiled. This was what exactly she needed.

“I have been, like, dying to see what this place was like inside,” Debbie added.

“So Mallory, are you and Jon really going to join?” Francine asked.

Mallory was not going to take the bait. “Well, Francine,” she said as if repeating a mathematical certainty, “now that Jon is management we almost have to, you know?”

“Good morning, madam, may I help you?” an officious man at the front door of the club said to Mallory.

“You may,” she replied, as Francine rolled her eyes. “My name is Mallory Bailey and my husband is Jonathan Bailey.”

“How very nice for you,” came the droll reply. Mallory laughed as she looked nervously at her friends. “Gene Walker—a club member—was to have called about four passes that are in my name?”

“I’m sorry madam, but Mister Walker has not called.”

“But he had to!” Mallory said with panic in her voice. “My husband said he would. Could you check, please? Gene Walker?”

“I know Mister Walker, madam, and I assure you that he has not called about any... passes. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” With that, he went inside the building and shut the

door behind him. Mallory just stared ahead, afraid to turn and face her friends.

“Well, what happened?” Francine demanded.

“I thought you had passes?” Mary Ellen asked.

“Yes, I did. I mean I was supposed to. Jonathan didn’t get the actual passes in time, but he was supposed to have Gene call. God-damn it!”

Debbie laid a sympathetic hand on Mallory’s shoulder. “Well don’t worry about it, Mal, I mean we can always come back.”

“I’m just so angry. So embarrassed.”

Mary Ellen placed a hand on Mallory’s other shoulder. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, Mal. You’ve got to figure something happened at the office that kept Jon from—”

“I’ll tell you what happened,” she yelled, shaking their hands from her shoulders. “I trusted my husband to do something right, for a change.”

“Look, Mal,” Francine said with surprising softness, “Mary Ellen is right, there must have been a problem at the office—”

“I’ll tell you what the problem is,” Mallory spit back. “It’s that husband of mine and his total lack of respect for me.”

“Mal, take it easy,” Francine said although it was clear to everyone that she was not going to do anything of the sort.

For the rest of the day Mallory managed to keep up a pretty good head of steam. The girls took her to lunch and tried to convince her that what happened was no big deal. They reminded her how hard Jonathan was working to give her all the things she wanted. But Mallory wasn’t listening. She didn’t want to be calmed down. Lunch ended and the girls all went home with no sign, despite their best efforts, of Mallory excusing

Jonathan's transgression.

By the time Jonathan entered the house a little after six, the incident had festered inside Mallory to the point of being cancerous. And she had every intention of spreading it to her husband.

"What more do you want from me, Mal? I mean how many more times can I apologize?" a fatigued Jonathan said a few hours later. It was almost midnight and, except for bathroom breaks, the argument had been non-stop.

"Keep apologizing. When you get there, I'll let you know."

Jonathan felt like he had gone ten rounds with the heavyweight champ without the benefit of a referee, clergy, or a cup. In fact, he had barely recovered from his meeting with Gene by the time he got home, only to have Mallory take over the pummeling of his bruised body and mind. It was just too much.

"I can't do this anymore," he suddenly announced as he got up and walked to the door.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means I'm tired, Mallory. I'm tired of being berated because I don't try. I'm tired of being berated when I do. I'm just tired."

"And I'm tired of wondering who's going to walk through that door every day. Will it be the go-getter who makes my heart race, or the lazy—"

"Now just a second, Mallory," he exploded. "I may be a lot of things but lazy is not one of them. Just because I don't want to fight over every little thing that goes wrong—"

"I don't fight over everything!"

"Well, if there's something you won't fight over I haven't found it, because it would be the only thing I'd want to talk about," he said just before turning again for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“Downstairs,” he replied without turning around.

“Why do you have to go downstairs?”

He spun around and glared at her. “Jesus Christ, Mallory! Do we have to fight over whether I want to go downstairs?”

They looked at each other helplessly from across the room. There was so much that could have been said at that moment, so much that should have been said to begin the healing, but neither felt the will or the strength to try. Jonathan turned sadly and walked downstairs to the kitchen and dropped onto a chair at the table.

He suddenly realized that he was very hungry. He got up and walked over to the refrigerator and began to forage for something to eat, when he caught sight of a bottle of beer sitting in the door. He shrugged his shoulders, took it out, and opened it with a flick of his wrist, not even waiting to sit down before lifting it to his lips and taking a giant gulp. His throat was dry from the marathon with Mallory, and the beer felt good going down.

He took another swallow, mindlessly looking around the kitchen before spotting the radio on the table. He smiled when he sat down at the table and realized how long it had been since he had allowed himself the pleasure of listening to the radio. He turned it on and heard a familiar voice.

“You’re tuned to the Boston Fan, WBFN, and this is Guy Wayland.”

Guy Wayland! Jonathan hadn’t heard that name in months. What was Guy doing on the air at this time of night? The tired voice continued.

“All right you maniac insomniac sports fans, this is your chance to talk about today’s sports headlines. Patriots, Bruins, Celtics, you name it. This is Guy Wayland on

the Boston Fan late night, all night.”

From the radio came a yawn.

“Sorry. We’re taking your calls at 1—800—”

There was a pause and then another yawn.

“Sorry. 1—800—BOSTON—FAN.”

Another yawn, this one even bigger than the first.

“Excuse me. Anyway you can call and talk about your favorite sport and team here on the Boston Fan. Just remember the one rule that we have here on the Guy Wayland overnight show. No Red Sox!”

Word of the late night in Jon’s office had spread through the office of Tennis.Net. Brian had made sure that everyone knew how the boy wunderkind was cracking under the pressure, and Kenny, Marie, and Phil were finding themselves in a tough spot trying to defend a guy whom they liked personally, but professionally wanted as far away from them as possible. (In this regard the corporate world is not much different than the school playground at recess—you are who you play with. Play catch with the nerds, and, well...) While most of the day keeping Jonathan at a distance wasn’t a problem— he was keeping to himself in his office, out of harm’s way—lunch was a different story.

Phil, Kenny, and Marie sat down around a table at the far end of the cafeteria and silently unpacked their lunches. Out of the corner of her eye Marie watched as Kenny gingerly unfolded the wax paper around his sandwich as if defusing a bomb. He peered in between the two pieces of bread and groaned loudly before slumping into his seat. Marie first looked over at Phil, who rolled his eyes, shook his head, and sighed. Then she

reached over the table and grabbed Kenny's sandwich and substituted it for hers. Kenny looked at her hopefully. "Egg salad?"

Marie nodded, and Kenny wiped a mock tear from his eyes as Phil watched in amusement. "Bless you. You are my God," Kenny said.

"Now there's an interesting religion," Phil said.

Marie laughed. "Yea. Who needs holy water when you've got mayonnaise?"

"No, no, not mayonnaise," Phil said emphatically.

"What, then?" Marie asked as Kenny blissfully chewed the egg salad sandwich.

"Miracle Whip, of course," he replied with a smile, as Marie and Phil laughed.

Kenny stopped chewing long enough to say, through a mouthful of egg salad. "Do you mind? I'm praying here."

They laughed before returning to their lunches.

Thanks to a late-September rain many people had decided to eat at the office, and by now just about every seat at every table was filled with people talking and laughing and in general enjoying themselves. Then Jonathan walked into the room.

It was like one of those Western movies where the bad guy walks into the bustling saloon and everything stops as he makes his way to the bar. Only in this case instead of ambling up to the bar and ordering up a whiskey, it was Jonathan walking over to a vending machine, depositing several coins into the slot, and pushing a button.

Nothing happened.

He pushed the button again.

Nothing.

And as a room full of people watched Jonathan began to bang and slam the machine, muttering several expletives at the manufacturer of the vending machine and his

mother. Kenny, Phil, and Marie looked helplessly at each other. Then, as quickly as it began, Jonathan's outburst ceased. He rested his head against the machine and sighed. Or sobbed. With his head buried in his arm no one could really be sure. He slowly lifted his head, which made everyone in the room—including Marie, Phil, and Kenny—turn immediately back to their lunches.

Shoulders hunched, Jonathan trudged out of the room. As he disappeared around the door, the room breathed a collective sigh, although Kenny, Marie, and Phil's were tinged with more than a little bit of guilt.

"You wanted to see me, Gene?" Jonathan asked as he stood in the vice president's doorway early the next morning.

Gene smiled and got up from his chair as he said "Yes, I did. Shut the door, please and sit down." He walked around and sat on the edge of his desk, directly in front of the leather chair in which Jonathan had just sat down. Jonathan looked up at Gene and was sure that he saw both pity and a little anger in the older man's eyes. Now it was just a question of which he would receive.

Gene began slowly, like a doctor who had just seen a spot on an X-ray. "You may be aware, Jon, that we've got some very upset people around here. Your mistakes have cost us one account—Stringer and Company—and only by the grace of God were we able to resubmit to Synergy, but only after we promised that you would not be on the account. I shouldn't have to make that kind of promise, wouldn't you agree?"

Jon nodded solemnly.

Gene cleared his throat and continued. "I won't bullshit you, Jon. There are a few

members of the board who wanted to let you go outright. But I don't like to fire people, especially when the real mistake may not have been theirs, but mine.

Wow. That one hurt. So he was a mistake. *I might as well start packing*, Jon thought.

Then he heard Gene say, "But you put in eight years that I argued should count for something, so here's what we're willing to do..."

Jonathan's ears perked up. A reprieve from the Governor! He listened intently as Gene laid out his option. That's right: option, singular. Jonathan was to request a transfer back to his old job, citing a desire to spend more time with his family, a ploy that was designed to save them both the embarrassment of having it officially being a demotion, even though that is precisely what it was.

There was, of course, another option, one that was never explicitly spoken by Gene. But Jonathan knew it involved the door. So he signed the document that had been carefully prepared by the personnel department, and he and Gene shook hands civilly. As he walked out of Gene's office and headed back to his desk, Jonathan could actually feel the load from his shoulders lifting, and he began to smile.

The smile remained as he began transferring both his business-related files and personal items from the office back into his old cubicle, which had remained unoccupied for all this time. Jonathan paused briefly when he recalled how angry Gene had gotten at him for moving his stuff from the cubicle to the office by himself. Nobody seemed to care when it was the opposite direction. As he hauled things across the aisle, he could see Kenny, Marie, and Phil poking their heads out of their own cubicles. He started to get angry that nobody offered to help him move.

Without any help, it took him a few hours to move what he needed back into his

cubicle, at which point he began the effort of sorting, filing, and throwing things out. As he sifted through the box of personal items, he found one item that caused him to freeze. It was the *Boston Globe* front page he had framed—a special edition just after the Red Sox had won the World Series. Across the top in large type were the words “WHAT CURSE?” and below was a color photo of Fenway Park just after the crowd had stormed the field.

He looked forlornly at the headline, and thought about everything that had transpired since that wonderful day almost a year ago. The victory, the celebration, his epiphany that cold winter’s day outside the ball park, his corporate rise and fall... Somehow there was a symmetry to it all. He, like the Red Sox, were now both back where they should have been all along. They were in last place and he was in a cubicle. Jonathan looked across the aisle at the now empty office and the marvelous maroon carpeting with the thick pile (that he would never be able to look at again without smiling in memory of that day with Mallory), and then back at his cubicle, and then at the framed newspaper in his hands.

He dumped it into the trash can and heaved a sigh of relief.

From across the aisle, he heard the phone ring in the office. *Not my problem now*, he thought smugly. Then a wave of guilt swept over him. *After everything Gene has done for me, I probably should answer it*, Jonathan thought as he got up, crossed the aisle and picked up the phone in the office.

“Jonathan Bailey. Oh, hi.” It was Mallory. Damn! He had completely forgotten to call her and tell her what was happening. He took a deep breath. “Hey Mal, we need to talk. No, I don’t want to do it over the phone. No, I don’t want to do it at the house, either. Why? Because we’ve had enough arguments there, already, okay? Could you

meet me at the bar in the Marriott in Burlington? At six? Great, I'll see you – ” Click.

Jonathan hung up the phone and returned to his cube. Moving had made him hungry, and seeing that it was 11:45, decided to go for an early lunch. Since it was early he had no trouble finding a seat at an empty table. He had just begun eating when Kenny, Marie, and Phil walked in, together.

“Hey guys, over here,” Jonathan waved enthusiastically, as if he really needed to show them where he was in the empty lunchroom. They looked at each other and grimaced, then turned to Jonathan and smiled all-too politely. They walked to his table, sat down, and silently began to unwrap their lunches.

“So, how have you guys been?”

“Fine,” Kenny said.

“All right,” Marie added.

“You know, same old, same old,” said Phil.

Save for the hum of the vending machines, the sound of crinkling wax paper, and the crunching of potato chips, it was pretty quiet in the lunchroom. Jonathan swore that he saw the Uncomfortable Silence—the one employee who never takes a day off—hovering gleefully over the table. He sighed and returned to his lunch.

Jonathan's sigh seemed to pierce the air around them, and Marie, feeling pangs of guilt, turned her head to Phil and with her eyes, urged him to say something. Phil nodded and turned to Jonathan. “So,” he said jovially “what happened to your team?”

“My team? You mean the Red Sox?”

Phil looked blankly at Jonathan. “Duh. Of course I mean the Red Sox. Don't you still follow them anymore? Or is one World Championship enough for you?”

Jonathan laughed. “I don't know, maybe I'm still getting over the one. It's funny,

but after all these years it was hard getting used to a being a winner. I mean rooting for a winner.”

Marie was the first to catch it. “Wasn’t that an interesting slip of the tongue.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said ‘it’s hard getting used to being a winner.’”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did,” confirmed Kenny. “You said being a winner. Right, Phil?”

Phil nodded his head.

Jonathan looked more than a little embarrassed. “That is such a strange thing for me to say, because the fact is...” he began, as he told them the whole story. About his improbable rise and inevitable fall and how what they thought they saw that morning was true—he was back among the cubicle dwellers. When he finished he sat back and slumped in his chair.

Marie reached over and placed her hand on Jonathan’s arm and smiled. “Look, Jon, it’s all right, you know? It’s like that book that guy wrote. Bad things happen to good people.”

He smiled back. “So you still think I’m a good person? Even though I was a manager?”

“None of us ever said you weren’t one of the good guys,” she replied. Kenny and Phil nodded in agreement.

“Thanks,” he said gratefully. “Listen, guys...” he began, thankful that no one else had entered the lunch room as he was feeling self-conscious as hell. “If I haven’t been around, you know, for lunches, or been as... I don’t know, friendly, I guess, as I used to be, I just want you to know it’s only because I’ve been so busy, you know. This job...”

“Jon,” Kenny interrupted, “It’s all right. We know it wasn’t personal. You weren’t blowing us off. Besides, this wasn’t all your fault. There might have been a little jealousy on our parts, too. You know, the new office. The job and everything.”

“Hey, speak for yourself,” Phil said, defensively.

Kenny turned and looked harshly at Phil, who returned a sheepish gaze. “Yea, maybe it was.”

Jonathan beamed gratefully at his friends. “Believe me, guys, there was nothing to be jealous of.” Then, a few seconds later, “except maybe for the carpet,” he added mischievously.

Phil, Kenny and Marie laughed, and Jonathan smiled at each other. Above them, Uncomfortable Silence burst into flames and screamed before disappearing as the four of them dove into their lunches.

After a few bites, Jonathan mused, “You know, I read that book.”

“Which book?” Kenny asked.

“That book about bad things happening to good people. Mallory and I were given a copy after... you know, after her surgery. Didn’t do either of us any good. Mallory was in such a bad way no book was going to help her. And me, I’ve always understood why bad things happening to good people.”

“Oh yea?” Marie seemed genuinely curious. “Why?”

“Entropy.”

“Entropy? What’s that?”

“It’s the general running down of the universe. Between friction and gravity, and a whole bunch of other stuff the universe is slowing down. Eventually everything runs down, wears out and stops working. That’s why hearts fail and elevator cables snap and

car brake fail. Entropy. So why shouldn't bad stuff happen to everyone, even the good ones? That's just the universe falling apart. Now the book I'm waiting for someone to write is why good things happen to bad people, because those bastards are beating the odds and going against the universe."

"Got anyone particular in mind?" Phil asked.

"I got a lot of people in mind. The sleazy landlord with the roach infested apartment building who beats an indictment. Or the wife-beater who wins the lottery and splits with another woman. Or the corporate raider who downsizes 2000 workers, gets a bonus for maintaining the bottom line, goes on a skiing trip, hits a tree, but doesn't break a leg. Or Brian. Why should creeps like that beat the odds but nuns get cancer?"

It was Marie who finally broke the silence.

"Thank you, Jon. I had forgotten how much fun you were to have at lunch."

CHAPTER 10.

One Strike Away

Mallory didn't like bars. She hated the smoke that invaded her lungs while she was there, and the stench of tobacco that stuck to her clothes for weeks afterwards. She hated loud music, she didn't drink a lot, and she didn't care much for the sort of people who liked all those things. And, as she stepped into the bar at the Marriott, she recalled how she had been dragged to Cheers on that fateful October night eighteen years ago by Debbie, Mary Ellen, and Francine, and how in her darker moments she would say that that should have killed their friendship because it was there she met Jonathan. It was a joke that had become tired and more than a little sad with each telling.

The hotel was booked, as it always was this time of year, with leaf-peepers up for the foliage season. Between them and the regulars who used the "sorry, honey but the traffic was really bad so me and the gang decided to have a drink while it cleared up" excuse the bar was pretty crowded, which didn't help Mallory's anxious, angry mood. Nor did the phone call from Mary Ellen, who had spoken with Kenny and tipped off Mallory about her husband's demotion.

She sighed when she realized, after a quick sweep of the room, that Jonathan was not there yet. "Great," she muttered to herself. "This is all I need now." She wearily

trudged up to the bar where she saw one empty seat in between a young woman with her boyfriend, and an older man who appeared to be alone.

“What’ll it be?” the bartender asked, as Mallory sat down.

“Club soda, please.” Then, as the bartender turned to grab a glass, she said “No, wait a minute. A glass of wine, please.”

“Any particular type? Brand?” the bartender, looking a little bored, asked.

“I don’t care. The house wine is will be fine, I’m sure.”

The bartender returned about a minute later with her drink, which he placed on the counter before her. “Want me to run a tab?”

“Sure.” Might as well, she figured. Jonathan was going to be here soon and he was going to need a drink if she had anything to say about it. She took a sip of the wine and breathed in and out very deliberately, as her mind began to wander back over the events of the past year. Jonathan’s sudden interest in work. His quick rise up the ladder at Tennis.Net and his equally quick descent. She thought about the club, and how special it made her feel to sweep onto the patio that warm spring evening last year, and how Jonathan’s laziness was going to ruin it all, damn it! She slapped her hand against the bar in frustration but she struck the side of her glass, instead, sending it and most of the wine inside flying right into the lap of the man sitting next to her.

“Oh, my God, I am so sorry,” she said as she grabbed a fistful of cocktail napkins and handed them to the man, who stood up to wipe himself off.

“It’s all right. I’m all right,” he said politely as he grabbed the napkins from Mallory’s hand and sopped up the wine from his jacket.

“That was just so clumsy of me,” she said, feeling like a thousand eyes were watching her.

“Really, don’t give it a second thought. It’s an old suit, anyway.”

“You’re just being kind.”

“No, just truthful.”

“Oh, this is just so clumsy of me. At least let me buy you a drink.”

The man stopped cleaning himself for a moment. “Only if you promise not to tell my wife—she’s on a cholesterol kick and this will be my second.”

Mallory smiled. “Your secret’s safe with me.” She flagged down the bartender.

“Excuse me, can I get a…” Mallory looked to the man inquisitively.

“Scotch rocks,” he replied, on cue.

“And I’ll have another wine, please.” The bartender nodded, poured their drinks, and placed them on the bar. “Put them on my tab, please.” The bartender nodded and moved on to another customer.

“Thank you,” the man said as he raised the glass.

“Your welcome. It’s the least I could do,” Mallory replied as she took a sip of her wine. She looked at him and decided he wasn’t bad looking. In his fifties, she guessed from the gray in his hair and moustache, but still handsome. “So, how long have you been married?”

“Me? Twenty-five years.”

“Wow,” she said, realizing that she and Jonathan had been married over 15 years. The number depressed her.

“Doesn’t feel like 25 years, though.”

“Really?”

“Nope,” he replied, perfectly deadpan. “Feels more like 50.” She looked at him blankly. “I was kidding. That was a joke? Really, it was.”

The sad expression on Mallory's face didn't change.

"Sorry, did I hit a sore spot?"

Mallory didn't say anything. She didn't have to.

"You know, if you or anyone else were to tell me that their marriage was perfect I'd know you were either a liar... or single."

Mallory smiled at his joke, and said "I know, fighting is supposed to bring people together. It just seems lately that's all we do."

"I know it may seem that way," the man started to say, when Mallory interrupted.

"But in our case—" the man said...

"—it's true." They both laughed as they completed the sentence together.

"Lady, trust me, everybody says that."

Mallory swirled the glass of wine in her hand. Hesitantly, she asked, "So... I hope you don't mind my asking... What do you and your wife fight about?"

"The usual stuff. I don't pick up after myself. She's always late. Boy, that was a big one. I swear I was never late in my life until I got married. Then there was my job. I used to be on the road a lot and she sometimes complained I cared more about it than our marriage. It wasn't true, but I could understand how she could feel that way."

"What's a lot?"

"About half the year," he replied, matter-of-factly.

"Half a year! No wonder your wife got upset."

"We used to joke that the reason our marriage lasted so long is that we only had to live together for six months out of every 12."

"What did you do for a living?"

"Me? Oh, I worked in the sports industry," he said, and for the first time she got the

feeling he wasn't being completely honest with her. Which of course only raised her curiosity.

"Sales, Marketing, something like that?"

"Something like that. I'm retired now."

Damn, he was good. Must have been a salesman, Mallory figured. "Retired? You don't look old enough."

"Thanks. You could say I took early retirement."

"Did you like your job?"

He laughed ironically and, Mallory thought, a bit sadly. "Very much. I always considered myself to be very lucky to be doing what I did."

"I don't think my husband has ever felt that way about anything he's ever done."

"Some guys are like that. The job is just a job, you know," he said as he took another sip of his drink.

"Or maybe they're so afraid of failure that they just accept mediocrity." Mallory furrowed her brow and looked deep into her glass of wine. The man bent his head down to try and catch her attention, but Mallory just stared at her drink.

"I don't know your husband," she heard him say. "But maybe you're being too hard on him. Everyone is afraid of failure, you know."

Mallory picked her head up and looked right at him. "You, too?"

"Of course," he laughed.

"But did fear ever stop you from trying?"

"No, but trying didn't stop me from failing, either."

"So you failed once in a while? How bad could it have been?"

"It was the worst kind. When there were a lot of people counting on me to do

something they'd seen me do hundreds and hundreds of times before. But this one time..." His voice trailed off and he took another sip of his drink. "Well, anyway, that's all in the past, now. It was rough for a while but at least I'm still around to talk about it."

"Goodness, you make it sound like it was life or death."

"It could have been."

Mallory looked shocked. "I can't believe that."

"Ever hear of a guy named Donnie Moore?" the man asked. Mallory shook her head. He took another sip of his drink, then set the glass down on the bar and looked at her. "He was a pitcher for the California Angels."

"Do you know him from the sports business?"

"You could say I did."

Mallory was about to take a sip of her wine when she paused. It was the way he said the last word.

"Did?" she asked.

"Do you know the game?" the man asked.

"Not really. My husband is a fanatic for it."

"Donnie was what is called a relief pitcher. A guy who goes into a game in the late innings, usually when his team is ahead, and tries to preserve the win. And he was pretty good at it, too. From a couple of years in the mid-eighties he saved 68 games, which isn't bad." He fell silent.

"What happened to him?" Mallory asked, her curiosity rising. The man seemed to need time to compose himself, so she waited patiently until, finally, he began to speak again.

"In 1986 the Angels—that's the team he was playing for at the time—they were one

strike away from going to the World Series, something they had never done in their entire history, when Donnie threw a split-finger fastball right down the middle of the plate that a guy named Dave Henderson hit for a home run.”

“And the Angels lost the game?” she asked.

“Uh huh,” he said, nodding. “Up to that point the Angels were leading the series three games to one but it seemed like the moment that ball sailed over the wall, all the air went out of them. They lost the next two games and the Red Sox – that’s who they were playing – went to the World Series. He paused and took a sip of his drink. Mallory wasn’t sure but she thought she saw his hand shaking as he lifted his glass. The drink seemed to help, and he turned to her earnestly.

“Now, between you and me, Donnie shouldn’t have been in that game. He had a cortisone injection the night before and his arm wasn’t ready to throw major-league stuff. But he was a team player and all that bullshit so when the manager pointed to him Donnie took the ball.” The man turned sourly to his drink and said, bitterly. “The fans don’t want to hear that, though. All they know is that Donnie’s pitch was the end of the Angels for that year and they never forgave him. He never forgave himself, either.”

The pause he took to sip his drink was agonizing, and Mallory felt a knot beginning to form in her stomach. She was afraid to ask but knew she had to. “What do you mean, never forgave himself?”

“Three years after that pitch, Donnie Moore shot himself in the head.”

Mallory almost dropped her glass. “What? But why? Not because...”

He nodded. “That’s right. Because of that one pitch. That one lousy pitch. You see, from that moment on, wherever Donnie went, he was known as the man who lost the chance to go to the World Series.”

Mallory noticed the agitation rising in his voice. Or was agitation the right word? The more he spoke the more she realized that the better word was... understanding.

“Everyone forgot about the other 24 guys on the team,” he continued. “They forgot about the coaches and the manager and all of the hundreds of individual decisions that each one made as part of that one single inning, never mind the thousands that they collectively made in that particular game. All they cared about, all they wanted to talk about was that one, single pitch. Eventually, it got to him, and...” The man sighed and slumped forward, cupping the tiny glass with both hands.

Mallory almost felt like crying. “That’s so... so unfair.”

“Who was it that said life isn’t fair? He was right. In spades,” the man replied as he finished the last drops of his drink.

“I guess in a situation like that you learn a lot about who your real friends are.”

“Lady, you just said a mouthful. Trust me. I can tell you from my own experience that the friends who stuck with me, who defended me... well, let’s just say they had to put up with a lot of abuse, too. But I believe it made them better people in the end. Not to mention better friends and lovers.”

“You mean your wife?” she asked. He nodded, and she heard herself ask, “Do you think you love her more because she stuck with you?”

The question seemed to catch him off-guard, and for a moment he just sat there furrowing his brow, though Mallory wasn’t sure if it was because he needed to come up with the answer or if he was deciding whether or not to share the answer he already had. Whichever it was, a few seconds later he lifted his head and turned to her and said “Yes. Yes I do.”

“And those who didn’t stick with you?”

He smiled. “Shallow people are just that, so what are you going to do? In retrospect it’s obvious they added nothing to my life anyway. I can honestly say I don’t miss a single damn one of them.

Mallory nodded her head, and the man smiled. Then, from behind, she heard a familiar voice. “Am I interrupting anything?”

Mallory turned and saw Jonathan staring at the man. “Hello,” she said, suddenly feeling a bit funny about talking to strange man at a bar. “We were just having the most fascinating conversation.”

“Really?” Jonathan asked, “about what?”

“Why don’t you take my seat?” the man interrupted as he got up from his barstool.

“Are you sure?” Jonathan asked, secretly hoping the man would stay and stall his impending discussion with Mallory. “I didn’t mean to chase you away”

“He’s right,” Mallory said, equally anxious to avoid talking to Jon. “Why don’t you stay?”

“No, thank you both. I’ve had my limit, anyway, and it’s time I got home to my wife.”

“Oh. Okay,” Mallory said to the man as he and Jonathan exchanged places. “Hey, you know what, I never got your name.”

“It was very nice meeting you. Thanks for the drink...” he winked, and added, “and the bath.”

“You welcome,” she replied, smiling at their private joke. She noted that Jonathan could not take his eyes off the man, but she was sure—and a little disappointed—that it wasn’t jealousy he was displaying. More like a grasp for recognition. She watched them shake hands.

“Thanks for keeping my wife company,” he said to him.

“It was my pleasure.”

Jonathan looked like he was going to burst. “I’m sorry,” he said just as the man was about to leave, “but you look so familiar. Have we ever met?”

“I don’t think so. But I get that a lot. Guess I have one of those faces,” he shrugged before turning and limping away through the crowd. Jonathan saw one or two other people in the crowd give the man a look of faded recognition as he passed them. He was soon through the door and out of the bar.

“So... been waiting long?”

“No,” she replied politely.

“Good evening. What will you have?”

Jon was grateful to the bartender for breaking the silence. He ordered a beer and when it arrived he took a long swig of the drink, welcoming the sensation of the alcohol coursing down his throat. Then he laid the glass on the table, took a deep breath, and braced himself. “Mallory, I—”

“It’s all right. I know,” she said quickly. “Kenny called Mary Beth.”

Jonathan chuckled. “Faster than the Internet.”

“And cheaper, too.”

“Well, now that the cat’s out of the bag, I guess you should know everything. My return to the old cube also means a return to my old cube salary, which means...”

“I know. The new house, the car, the club membership...” her voice trailed off.

Jonathan looked at his wife helplessly. “I don’t know what to say.”

Mallory reached across the bar and grasped Jonathan’s trembling hand. “How about... ‘let’s go home?’”

The reporter looked into the camera and waited patiently until a small red light on top of it blinked on. “Thank you, Liz,” he said, acknowledging his introduction from the in-studio anchor. “This is the day that preservationists, Fenway neighborhood activists, tax-watchdog groups, and others have been fighting for years, the day when the wrecking ball will begin taking down Fenway Park. Behind me you can see the cranes that have been brought in to begin the process of tearing down America’s oldest professional baseball field, Fenway Park. And everyone seems to have something say...”

The reporter stood motionless for a few seconds until he heard the producer yell “Okay, we’re clear,” which meant his pre-taped interviews were being broadcast and he could relax for a few minutes. He looked behind the police barriers on Brookline Avenue at the thousands of people who had braved the cold to witness the event. There were elderly men and women weeping openly and without shame, angry protestors still clinging to their SAVE FENWAY PARK signs, and parents with sad faces holding tiny children, no doubt saying to them that someday they could tell their children they were here, the day that Fenway Park was torn down.

Across Brookline Avenue, in the middle of that crowd, Jonathan and Mallory Bailey huddled together in the cold and watched as one of the cranes began lumbering down Yawkey Way. As the hot exhaust from the crane’s diesel engine hit the cold air, it formed a white cloud of steam that billowed around the machine, making it look like some ghastly dragon out of a children’s book. The sight hushed the crowd.

“And we’re back live with you now,” the reporter on Yawkey Way was saying earnestly to the camera. “As promised, we are going to show you the moment it happens,

the moment when Fenway Park's demise becomes a reality..."

"Are you all right?" Mallory whispered to Jonathan. He nodded silently. They both watched as the crane operator began moving the cab back and forth, causing the ball at the end of the cable to swing. It soon etched out a giant arc across the street, grazing the walls of the ball park. With one last pull of a lever, the ball took a final warm-up swing before racing across the street, its arc interrupted by its impact with the granite front of the park's brick façade. Large chunks of masonry fell to the ground. Across the street, some people winced. The crane reared back for another strike and Jonathan squeezed his wife's hand even harder.

"Mommy? Daddy? I'm cold," a child, standing between them, said.

Jonathan leaned down and smiled at her. "Cold, huh?" He winked secretly to Mallory, then looked at his daughter. "Say... who wants some hot chocolate?"

The little girl squealed with delight. "Yay! Hot chocolate! I do! I do! I do!" Jonathan smiled as he marveled how a child from half a world away could possess the same pair of beautiful green eyes his wife had.

"We can go now," he said softly.

"Are you sure, Jon?"

Jon stood up and nodded, and they gently kissed. From behind them came another sickening thud of 90-year-old masonry hitting the pavement. The crowd groaned.

Jonathan turned and looked back with satisfaction at the old ball park. "You know, when I was a little boy I actually thought I could affect the outcome of a game. That if I wished or prayed really hard then Yazstremski would hit a homer or Tiant would throw a strike. I guess part of growing up is realizing that you can enjoy the game all you want, but there's really nothing you can do about what happens on the field. That what you

have to do is take care of what you do have control over. All the rest will just fall into place.”

Mallory was smiling proudly at him now, and he beamed back at her as he knelt down and said to his daughter, “Come on, Jennifer, let’s get that hot chocolate!”

The little girl squealed happily as the crowd groaned again while another piece of old Fenway Park fell to the ground. Mallory and Jonathan each took one of their daughter’s hands, and, after one last look at the slowly disintegrating old building, turned and walked away.

Standing alone in the crowd, fingering a tiny vial of green liquid in his pocket, a tall, mysterious figure said to himself, “Nothing you can do, Jonathan? Don’t be so sure.”