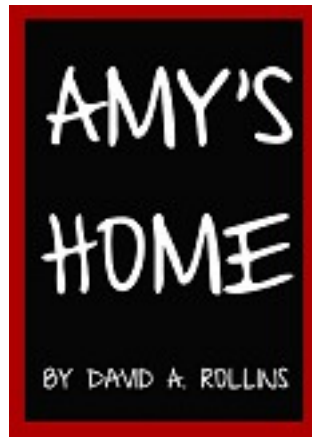


AMY'S HOME



BY DAVID A. ROLLINS

A brief preview
Courtesy of DavidARollins.com

PREFACE

It was one of those perfect summer days, when the afternoon sun is warm and friendly and the air is fresh and clean. The leaves up in the tall oaks whispered softly from their branches as they fluttered like butterfly wings on the light wind. You could smell the freshly mowed grass on the lawn and the sweet scent of honeysuckle from the nearby woods, while the birds overhead set it all to music with their lilting songs.

April Coefield stood in the kitchen of her house on Dogwood Road making lunch for her husband, who was presently in the living room reading his paper. Her young daughter had a friend over to play and the two of them had been running and laughing with each other under April's feet all morning.

"Why don't you two go play outside," April said with a loving smile. "How you can stay in the house on a day like this is beyond me!"

"Okay mommy," her daughter readily agreed. "Can I go get my ball first?"

"It's up in your room," April informed her.

The young child raced up to her bedroom to get the big colorful ball that her friend had given to her on her last birthday. She came running back downstairs with the ball in her hands and laughingly bolted through the back door with her dear companion close behind.

"Stay in the yard!" April called through the window above the kitchen sink.

Brian Coefield looked up from his newspaper when his wife came into the room, anxious to have his lunch. He neatly folded the paper, tucking it between the arm and seat of his chair. April shook her head and let out an exhausted sigh as she sat his lunch down on the table beside his chair.

"Those two are going to drive me crazy," she exclaimed.

Brian smiled admiringly at her. "Oh, you love it and you know it!" he replied.

April sat down on the arm of her husband's chair to rest for a moment, staring in toward the kitchen door with a pained expression on her face.

"I know, but I still worry about those two," she remarked.

"Well, there's not much that we can do about it, is there? It's out of our hands," Brian replied.

April continued to stare at the back door, lost in her thoughts.

“Don’t worry,” Brian reassured her. “It’ll be fine, you’ll see.”

April sighed another heavy sigh and forced a smile, hoping that her husband was right. “I suppose,” she said as she leaned over to pat her perspiring forehead with the hem of her apron. “My goodness but it’s warm today.”

She fanned herself as she got up to go back to the kitchen. As she left the room she suddenly heard a terrifying scream from outside, followed by the sound of screeching tires, a thunderous crash, and the vulgar concussions of shattering glass and crunching metal.

“*Brian?*” she nervously called back to her husband.

But Brian was already on his feet and heading outside. April ran into the living room again, watching anxiously from the screen door.

“*Amy?*” Brian called out as his eyes searched the yard.

He could smell the unpleasant odor of smoke and burnt rubber in the air as he ran across the lawn, and he could also hear a faint hissing sound, like the release of hot liquids escaping under extreme pressure coming from out in the street. Brian rushed by his daughter’s young friend near the curb, whose petrified expression gave a foreboding warning that his worst fears may have already been realized.

As he ran between the parked cars out into the street he could see his daughter’s ball lying in the middle of road. When he bent down to pick it up, he noticed the crumpled car lying upside down on its roof several yards away. He stared at it for a moment, letting his worried mind adjust to what he was seeing. The occupants of the vehicle were still inside, lying there unconscious, perhaps even dead for all he knew. And then, with fear pounding in his heart, unlike anything he had ever felt before, he hesitantly stood up and turned around to look back down the street in the other direction.

At first his mind didn’t want to accept what his eyes were seeing. It’s that few seconds in between the utter confusion and the agonizing horror that had taken hold of him, when time just stops. But soon the reality set in as a stabbing pain shot through his chest, taking his breath away, and his eyes widened in shock as he gasped for more air. And then he screamed!

CHAPTER ONE

COMING HOME

My father was Clarence Allan, a noted Political Analyst whose syndicated column appeared in every major newspaper across the country. After graduating from high school he moved to New York City to study Broadcasting at NYU. While he was there he met and married my mother and they eventually settled down in Massachusetts, just north of the Cape.

Toward the end of his long lucrative career, he also hosted a syndicated radio talk show called "Washington: Under The Light", and with the advent of Cable, made the logical transition to public television with a Sunday morning program of the same name. It very quickly became "the" most popular program on the Sunday morning talk-show circuit until his death recently from a heart attack. I mention this here only because I loved and admired my father. His death would change my life in a way I never could have fathomed in my wildest imaginations.

Actually, it was my mother's failing health that ultimately changed my life. After my father's death, I suddenly found myself back in America, having spent many years abroad, to care for her during a lengthy convalescence from a fall that fractured her hip. It was to be an indefinite move, leaving my wife and I justifiably concerned about how it would ultimately affect our future, as well as our careers.

My name is John D. Allan, a writer of political thrillers by profession, an endeavor in which I have been quite successful I might add. Although born and raised in America, I have spent the better part of the last decade living and working in England with my wife Mary. Upon notification of the death of my father, I immediately made arrangements to return home.

From as early as I can remember, my mother suffered from a severe mental disorder. The onset was slow at first, but became progressively worse as the years went on. The doctors diagnosed her as schizophrenic. She heard voices and saw people who were not there. Although I was too young to understand at the time, as a child I can remember sitting in the kitchen with her while she held

conversations with no one at all, and thinking that it was some kind of game she was playing with me.

My father unselfishly exhausted every resource available to him by means of his fame and financial status to make her life as normal as possible. Of course, there were times when she needed to be institutionalized, though for the most part, she remained at home in our house on Dogwood Road, surrounded by a competent staff of house keepers and nurses to look after her when my father was away, which was quite often.

As one might imagine, my home life as a child was far different from the usual routines of the average American family. However, in retrospect, I admit it all seemed quite normal to me then. The occasional comings and goings of famous political dignitaries and major Hollywood stars was commonplace in our household, and I was well into my teens before I ever began to comprehend the width and breadth of my father's reach. He was well known among his peers as being brutally honest, unswerving in his integrity, and uncompromising in his compassion for people from all walks of life.

Admiring my father as I did, it was a logical progression that I aspired to follow in his footsteps. Upon graduating from high school I enrolled in college with Political Science as my major. However, I soon found out that I was my own person after all. As time passed, it gradually became clear that the world of *real* politics held no meaningful fascination for me. I found that my true calling, my passion as it were, was writing. I desperately wanted to be an author. So in my second semester I changed from Political Science to a Creative Writing curriculum.

I suppose one could argue that I inherited my talent for writing from my father, although he dealt mainly with the realities of the world, real people and real situations, whereas my world is my imagination. However, when I think back about it now, it's possible that it was those early childhood conversations with my mother in the kitchen that ultimately helped to develop my vivid imagination. Perhaps I got the best from both of them.

Nevertheless, whichever of them was responsible for my creative development, I took it and ran with it. By the time I graduated from college I had already

completed my first novel, and with the strength of my father's name behind me I went looking for a publisher.

Of course, even with a famous man such as my father behind me, that will only take you so far. My talent has taken me the rest of the way. Still, I will always be grateful to my father for his encouragement and inspiration while I found my name. I decided that once I was settled down again, I would resign myself to writing his autobiography. What greater tribute could a son offer his father than this? But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Mary and I were preparing to take a long awaited vacation to Greece when the news of my father's death reached us. I had just finished my tenth novel the week before and was looking forward to not thinking about *anything* for a couple of weeks. Mary had been burning the midnight oil as well, having just spent the last two years as Editor in Chief of a new women's magazine she was developing called "Twenty-First Century Woman", which was scheduled to launch after we returned.

With our vacation plans on hold, we quickly made arrangements to travel to America for my father's funeral. I had not visited my parents in several years, and that fact alone left me with an uneasy feeling that this trip was going to be a life-changing event for all of us. One detail in particular that worried me was that my father had always taken care of my mother. Now that he was gone, would that responsibility fall to me?

Not that I would ever shirk that responsibility. After all, I loved my mother dearly. All the same, I never had to deal with her illness on the same level as my father. Even though I was aware that her health had been failing steadily over the last few years, I really had no true concept of her condition. That realization troubled me, to say the least. It troubled Mary as well.

We were both physically and mentally tired by the time our plane landed, and I still had to pick up the rental car. When we finally got to the rental desk, there was no one behind the counter to help us. I looked around but didn't see anyone. I was not in the mood for delays. Then suddenly this little man with thick glasses and an obvious toupee' came out of nowhere and walked behind the desk to help us. He looked hurried.

The man quickly put on his tie and placed his name plaque out in front of the counter. *David Place* it said in bold black letters, with the words *Rental Agent* under the name in smaller print. Mary was sitting over on a bench, impatiently waiting for me to finish. The harried rental agent leaned over and whispered to me so she couldn't hear.

"I had to pee!"

I just ignored him and quickly finished my business.

I remember the drive from the airport most vividly. My parent's live in a huge house in a very upscale neighborhood along the coast of Massachusetts, half way between Boston and Cape Cod. It was a long drive, and my wife and I spent most of it in silence. As afraid as I was of what lay ahead of us, I'm sure that my wife was even more apprehensive. The thought of us ending up in America indefinitely, away from our own home, had her worried.

I can't say that I blame her. We loved our home in England. Both of us had invested a lot of time and sweat making a go of it career wise. Now that we had finally reached a certain pinnacle of success, our house had become an irreplaceable sanctuary to us, a place where we could go to leave the madness of our success behind us for a while. The thought of losing that sanctuary was a scenario we both dreaded.

It was dusk when we turned onto Dogwood Road. I was driving. Mary did not want to risk driving on the wrong side of the road. Several things were going through my mind at the time. First and foremost, I was consumed with grief at the loss of my father, especially since I had not been there when it happened. No longer would I benefit from his innate wisdom, his strength of will, and his undying generosity. It would become a void that nothing else in my life would ever fill again.

Secondly, I was experiencing a floodwater of childhood memories, simply from being back home again. The smell of the air, tinged with a scent of the ocean a few miles away, took me back to those innocent days of my youth, when everything was right somehow. I longed to return to those days, to be with my old friends, to be without a care. Then suddenly, while I was busy enjoying those memories of my childhood, I heard my wife scream!

“John, look out!”

The sound of Mary’s terrified voice caught me off guard. It only took a split second for my mind to clear and my eyes to focus again. What I saw in front of me made my heart skip a beat. A young child, a little girl, had run out into the street chasing a ball. My reflexes immediately took over and I slammed on the brakes as the car came to a screeching halt, mere inches from the child.

Mary was holding on tightly to my arm, no doubt just as shaken as I was. We both just sat and stared at the little girl standing in front of our car. As she stared back at us, I noticed that there wasn’t a trace of fear in her eyes. I thought that was odd at the time, perhaps because I was so terrified by the incident myself, as any normal person would be.

“That was close!” I said with a nervous sigh of relief.

“Let me make sure she’s alright, John,” Mary said as she opened the car door.

Before Mary even got out of the car, the young child quickly scurried off as if she didn’t have a care in the world. Mary called to her, but the child had already disappeared into the shadows of the gathering darkness. My wife stared back at me from the street with an anguished look that sent a chill down my spine. It literally made me shudder, and I remember very distinctly hoping that this was not an omen or some premonition of things yet to come. She got back in the car and we drove off down the street.

Dogwood Road is a winding two-lane country road, plush with thick trees on either side that serve to hide the opulence of the houses that lay beyond them. As we pulled up to the gate of my parent’s expansive home, I could see that Mary was still bothered by the near accident a few moments before. She kept looking out of the back window, searching anxiously for any sign of the young child.

“We’re here, Mary,” I informed her.

“I hope she wasn’t too frightened, John,” Mary replied forlornly.

“I’m sure she’s fine,” I reassured her. “She’s probably forgotten all about it already.”

Mary loves children. In fact, we planned to start a family of our own in the near future. We lost a child in the early years of our marriage. It was hard on both of us. Mary carried the baby almost to term. After the miscarriage, we let our

careers dictate our lives for so long, it seemed that we never had time to think about children again. Mary was in her early thirties now, and our careers were leveling off to a point that allowed us a lot more freedom. Our planned vacation to Greece, which was now postponed by the tragic death of my father, was primarily a romantic get away for us, with the sole purpose of getting Mary pregnant. I for one was looking forward to doing my part in that endeavor.

Mary is the love of my life. I met her ten years ago at a book-signing event in London. We were married within six months. I've never met another woman like her. Mary is so alive, so vibrant, so beautiful, inside and out, the kind of woman who turns heads when she walks into a room.

She's also a formidable businesswoman. She single handedly took over a fledgling magazine two years ago, which was failing miserably, and gradually turned it into what everyone now agrees will be a huge success when it launches next month.

I pressed the buzzer on an intercom situated on a post at the entrance to the driveway. The entire house was wired with an elaborate "state of the art" security system, which any Head of State would be envious of. My father was an extremely strong willed person, however, for some weird reason he had always been paranoiac in his incessant need for security and privacy at home. The house had literally become a fortress. All it lacked was a mote.

A static female voice came over the speaker. "Please identify yourself and state your business," the voice requested.

"John and Mary Allan, arriving from England," I said into the box.

A security camera sitting on top of the gate was scanning us as I spoke to the house. A loud click sounded and the huge electric gate opened before us, as if Aladdin himself had commanded it.

"Welcome home Mr. Allan," the voice said as I drove through.

The white gravel driveway circled around to the right from the entrance through a thick grove of tall pine trees and passed directly in front of the house. As I mentioned before, it had been several years since I was last at home, and curiously the house appeared smaller than I remembered it to be. Still, I was glad to finally be home again.

As we pulled up in front of the big double doors, the front door opened, and to my utter delight and surprise out stepped Harold Morgan, my father's long time lawyer and business associate. Harold had been a huge part of our family for as long as I could remember. No one, and I do mean no one, ever did business with my father unless they went through Harold Morgan first. Their relationship was based on a strong mutual trust, and for good reason I might add. Harold Morgan was quite possibly the last honest man left in the world, at least as far as I was concerned.

"Harold! How good to see you," I said as I got out of the car.

"John, you really should have let me send the car for you," he replied, shaking my hand.

"You know me, Harold. No fuss. We needed a car while we were in town anyway."

"That could have been easily arranged," he argued.

I tactfully changed the subject. "You remember my wife, Mary," I said.

"Of course, how are you Mary? You're looking as lovely as ever."

Mary raised a surprised eyebrow, perhaps because she wasn't expecting him to sound so familiar. After all, she had only met him once before, and that was many years ago.

"Thank you, Mr. Morgan," she replied anyway.

"Let's get you both inside," he said, motioning toward the door. "Don't worry about the luggage, I'll have it brought up to your rooms."

Before we went in, I pulled Harold aside and whispered my concerns about my mother's condition to him, if only to prepare myself for the worse.

"How is my mother holding up?"

"I think you'll be pleasantly surprised," he assured me.

I wanted so much for that to be true, for Mary's sake as well as my own.

The foyer inside the front door is a huge circular room with a cathedral ceiling, accentuated by a breath taking triple tiered crystal chandelier. At the back of the foyer room, across a wide floor of Italian marble mosaics and sculptured columns, a long winding staircase hugged the wall, giving access to the rooms on the upper floors.

The foyer was my playground when I was a child. The one thing that I remember most about that room was the bustling of people who gathered there whenever my parents held one of their infamous dinners. It was there in the foyer that my mother and father held audience in regal fashion to some of the most famous and influential people in the country. They would mingle under the chandelier in their flowing gowns and black tuxedo's, drinking expensive champagne from tall crystal glasses, while eating exotic hors d' oeuvres served from shining silver trays by handsomely dressed caterers.

It all seemed so familiar, even though I had been removed from it for so long. Mary and I made good money and lived well, but it was certainly a far cry from the lifestyle my mother and father enjoyed. Still, I don't believe that I would trade our life for theirs. My wife and I were quite satisfied with the quiet little niche we had carved out for ourselves.

Mary was exhausted, I could tell. The jet lag would be intolerable for a day or so until we adjusted to the time change. On the other hand, I was in pretty good spirits, enjoying the pleasant memories still flashing through my mind as I looked around.

"I'll take you to your rooms so you can freshen up a bit," Harold said.

"Isn't my mother here?" I inquired. "I'd like to say hello first."

"Yes, she is. She's in the study. We've converted your father's study into a bedroom for her so she wouldn't have to use the stairs as often. She tires easily and wanted to rest, to conserve her energy before your arrival. She's asked me to have you both join her for dinner around eight o'clock, if that's agreeable."

"Is this going to be a formal affair?" I asked rather flippantly.

I didn't mean to sound rude. I just didn't believe what I was hearing. Did I just make an appointment with Harold Morgan to have dinner with my own mother? Perhaps I just misunderstood. Maybe I was more tired than I thought and feeling a little edgy and out of sorts due to the stress of the situation. I guess I'm just not used to a lifestyle of personal aids and assistants.

We always employed a maid and a butler when I lived at home, but there were new faces here now, unfamiliar to me, and it made me feel uncomfortable. They were milling about in the dining room, studying my wife and I with curious

interest as we talked in the foyer. Nor am I accustomed to having every minute of my day scribbled in on a daily planner like Harold Morgan is. I came home to spend time with my mother and to attend my father's funeral, and I certainly had no intention of being "scheduled in" while I was there.

Harold takes his job very seriously. He is, in fact, a very serious man in the way he conducts himself and all aspects of his life. I liken him to a Head Butler, a Manservant if you will, though he's not servant. He's a lawyer. He lives in a world of punctuation and irrefutable fact. There are no gray areas in Harold Morgan's life. Everything is black and white.

Mary and I do not live under the same blanket of luxury as my mother and father did. Not that we can't afford it, we just don't want it. Simplicity is our common goal. We don't even have a maid. In fact, when we realized we might be remaining in America indefinitely, we left the care of the house and the animals to Mary's sister Millicent and her husband Cedric.

Thinking of Millie reminded me that we needed to call home and let them know that we had arrived safely. As usual, my wife was one step ahead of me.

"Is there a phone I can use to make some calls, Mr. Morgan?" she inquired.

"Please, call me Harold," he replied. "The entire east wing is at your disposal while you're here. I've taken the liberty of setting up an office space adjacent to your bedroom for your personal convenience. I'm sure you will find it quite adequate for any of your communication needs."

Mary smiled, unimpressed. She was sure that he meant well, but this was all a bit over the top as far as she was concerned.

"Thank you . . . *Harold*. All I really need is a phone and an outlet for my laptop."

"Of course," he replied.

By the time we got to our room, our luggage had already been brought up. That's another thing that was creeping me out. The house had become a catacomb of hidden hallways and stairwells while I was away, allowing the servants the ability to move about the house out of sight without disturbing anyone, especially my mother. It must have cost my father a fortune in remodeling. I found it all to be rather strange myself.

“There is a competent staff on duty ready and willing to assist you with anything you require,” Harold informed us. “Feel free to avail yourselves of their help. Just pick up the phone beside the bed. Now, if there is nothing else, I have some urgent business that I must attend to before dinner.”

“We’re fine, thank you very much,” Mary said.

“Very good. I’ll see you at eight sharp then.”

After Harold left the room, Mary fell back on the plush bed, giggling to herself. “Where did your family ever find *him*?” she whispered.

I just grinned a little uncomfortably.

“I didn’t know whether to shake his hand or tip him,” she teased.

Mary patted her hand on the bed for me to join her. I crawled onto the bed, putting my arms around her, and kissed her softly.

“I love you, Mary,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry for all of this.”

“Not to worry, love,” she said. “I’m quite positive everything will work out fine. We’ll be back in England before you know it. Besides, your novel is finished and the magazine is almost ready to launch. As long as I have a phone and a fax machine I can handle my business from right here. It may not be Greece, but we’re here and we’re together. That’s all that matters.”

I pulled her closer to me. “You know, just because we didn’t make it to Greece doesn’t mean that we still can’t go ahead with our plan.”

Mary smiled playfully and draped her leg over my thigh. Then she kissed me tenderly, running her hands through my hair as she whispered into my ear.

“John?”

“Yes?”

“I *have* to call Millie.”

She laughed as I let out a frustrated sigh and rolled over on my back.

“Really, John. I *do* have some calls to make. Why don’t you have a shower and relax.”

“It will be a *cold* shower, I can assure you,” I complained.

Mary jumped up and began rummaging through the luggage looking for her personal logs. These comprised of three books that she always had with her, one for phone numbers and addresses, another for appointments, and lastly a

personal daily journal, a diary more or less. She wrote in it every evening before bed without fail. Having found her prized possessions, she took her laptop in hand and disappeared into the next room. I knew that once she was in there I wouldn't see her again for a couple of hours. I closed my weary eyes and rested my head on the pillow, not realizing how tired I was from the trip, and soon drifted off to sleep.

I'm not sure how long I slept, but I was awoken suddenly by the sound of Mary's voice. She was calling my name and shaking me gently.

"John, get up. Hurry!"

"*What?*" I groggily answered.

"Come with me."

Mary dragged me out of bed into the next room and over to the window.

"What's going on?" I asked rather irately.

"Bloody hell, she's gone!" she exclaimed.

"Who are you talking about, Mary?"

Mary turned back to me, a look of anxious disappointment in her eyes.

"She was *out* there John. The little girl, the one in the road."

"Out where?" I asked, still having no idea what she was talking about.

Mary gave me an exasperating look. "I was on the phone with Millie, and you know how I tend to pace when I'm on the phone."

I looked at her in bewilderment. "Yes. So?"

"Well, that's what I was doing, pacing around the room. As I walked by the window, I gazed outside. That's when I saw her. She was standing in the yard holding the ball in her hands, looking up at me."

"Okay, so you saw the little girl. What am I supposed to derive from all this?"

"What do you suppose she was she doing out there?" she asked.

"I don't know, Mary. Maybe she kicked her ball into the yard and came in after it. There are a lot of houses around here, all connected by common grounds and woods. I used to roam through the yards myself when I was kid. What are you getting at?"

"She looked so alone — so lost — I can't explain it. It was as if she was reaching out to me somehow."

“You’re scaring me now, Mary,” I said with a sleepy yawn. “Let’s not let our imaginations run away.”

“I’m serious, John.”

I was still groggy from being woken up suddenly, and perhaps I wasn’t thinking clearly, but it occurred to me that my wife was being overly concerned about this child, perhaps stemming from the anguish of losing her own child, a thought that I probably should have kept to myself.

“Mary, I don’t know who she is. All I know is we’ve had a stressful day so far. Our plans have been shot to hell. My father is dead! My mother is in God knows what condition, and I have no idea what tomorrow will bring. The last thing I need right now is my wife fretting over some little girl who lost her ball. Isn’t it enough for you that she didn’t get hurt out there on the street tonight? Do you have to suffer over her too?”

We both got very quiet. I knew I had said the wrong thing.

“I’m sorry, Mary. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“No, you’re right,” she said. “I suppose I am being a tad foolish.”

“Look, let’s just try to get through tonight,” I said, hoping to appease her. “It’s almost dinnertime and I’m anxious to see my mother. Tomorrow, I promise we’ll make every effort to find out who the little girl is. You can even invite her in if you want too.”

Mary looked at me, somewhat disappointed. “Alright, love,” she agreed, though unconvincingly, and I knew she would soon remind me of that promise.

“Good, now let’s go downstairs and say hello to my mother.”

Mary turned off her laptop, but before leaving the office, she gazed out of the window once more.

REUNION

The main dining room sits off the foyer, directly across from the study. There is another smaller dining area back by the kitchen that looks out into the back yard. The smaller kitchen is where I remember eating most of my meals when I

was a child. The big dining room was for special occasions only. Tonight would be one of those nights. The dining room was empty when we walked in, except for a young girl who was setting the table.

“Good evening,” I greeted her.

“Good evening sir,” she replied. “Good evening ma’am,” she said to Mary. “Dinner will be served shortly,” she informed us before hurrying off.

At that moment, the sound of my mother’s voice behind me filled my ears with joyous expectation. I turned around to take a look at her. She was in a wheel chair, being ushered into the room by Harold. Her eyes twinkled when she saw me. I could see tears welling up inside them as I approached her. Harold politely excused himself and walked off to the kitchen to check on our dinner, leaving the three of us alone to talk in private.

“Mother!” I whispered as I embraced her.

I had to admit that she looked absolutely radiant, much better than I expected. She cried on my shoulder and softly spoke my name several times as I kissed her cheek. I was so happy to see her.

“Look who’s here,” I said, motioning for Mary to join us.

“Mary!” mother exclaimed. “Oh dear, I’ve missed you both so much.”

Mary leaned over to hug and kiss her. “How are you, Ruth?”

“I couldn’t be better, dear,” she said with exuberance.

I was shocked! I wasn’t expecting this at all. I finally began to feel that perhaps this trip wasn’t going to be so bad after all.

“Is my son treating you well, Mary?”

“Quite!” my wife replied with a wide smile.

“Well, I know a lot of single rich young doctors if you ever get tired of him,” she teased.

“Oh, thanks a lot,” I said, still shocked at her energetic demeanor.

“He’d be lost without me,” Mary said, teasing back.

“All men are lost without women, dear. Clarence could stand toe-to-toe on stage with the most powerful leaders in the civilized world, but the poor man couldn’t find his socks without my help!”

We all laughed.

“Come, come, sit everyone, please,” my mother invited us.

As I pushed her wheelchair up to the table and made her comfortable, she called back to the kitchen. “Harold! Are we ever going to eat?” she yelled as we took our seats.

Dinner was great. The conversation was light. We kept it mostly to what Mary and I had been doing the last few years. There would be plenty time to talk about my father and more serious issues later. I was ecstatic at how well my mother seemed to be doing. She seemed very lucid and jovial and directed the conversation from the beginning. There were no signs of her mental illness evident in her actions or her thinking processes. I almost believed she had actually been cured. However, that was just about to change, and my wife would be the catalyst for it.

“How was your flight?” my mother asked.

“The flight was fine, just very long,” I replied.

“We almost had a terrible accident on the drive out here,” Mary mentioned. “A little girl ran into the street in front of the car. It’s a miracle we didn’t hit her.”

My mother’s facial expression immediately changed from one of enthusiasm to a decidedly more somber look.

“A little girl?” she asked.

“Yes, a very pretty little dark haired girl, maybe seven or eight years old. Do you know her? Does she live around here?”

My mother went silent, seemingly deep in thought, and looked across the table at Harold.

“Maybe,” she said.

The mood of the room had definitely changed. My feelings of well-being at seeing my mother’s remarkable improvement and state of mind dissipated in a flash and was replaced rather quickly with a feeling of foreboding again. Then something happened that left little doubt in my mind as to my mother’s mental health.

A beautiful set of double French doors leading out to the patio, draped elegantly with long sheer white curtains, made up the entire wall behind my seat. Suddenly, one of the doors flew open, taking us all by surprise. A strong gust of

wind followed, blowing the curtains out into the room, causing a vase of flowers to fall off the mantle and shatter on the floor. I quickly jumped up from the table and shut the door. When I came back to the table, I looked over at my mother's face. She seemed to be . . . elsewhere. It was something in her eyes, a kind of lost vacant look that I remember so well when I was younger.

"*Mother?*" I said.

"Perhaps I should take her back to her room now," Harold suggested. "It takes her a while to get used to changes in her routine, and this has been an exceptionally exciting evening for her. She tires easily."

As Harold stood to escort my mother out, she suddenly wheeled her chair over to the broken vase on the floor. She reached down and picked up one of the flowers. A tear rolled down her cheek as she looked over at us.

"Amy's home," she forlornly said.

My wife and I just stared blankly at each other.