

NEW CHAPTER FROM:

I SPEAK FOR THIS CHILD: TRUE STORIES OF A CHILD ADVOCATE

BY GAY COURTER

LOLITA II

Sandra's Story



Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs,
the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns.

—Vladimir Nabokov

Lillian Elliott, my case coordinator for the local Guardian ad Litem program, was on the phone explaining a new rule in her molasses-rich drawl. Volunteer advocates representing children, who were victims of a criminal complaint, were now required to have additional training before being certified for these cases. “I know you already have been through an incest case, but I think you'll find the course useful.”

“Are you asking me to take the training?” I asked.

“If you could find the time...” I waited for the other shoe to drop. “There is another complicated case, a girl who was sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend and...”

“And perhaps it has my name on it?” I filled in with a chuckle. We had bonded during the trial of a father who had molested both his son and daughter. Several other children had given evidence of their molestation as well, but the father had been acquitted. [See “[What Happened Next](#)” link for an update on this case and the others in the original book.] I was still the volunteer representing the children who were living in foster homes.

I am a novelist and filmmaker by profession living in a small town in Florida. For a long time I had been looking for a way to contribute to the community. Ever since my teen years, when I worked with the American Friends Service Committee in a migrant workers village in California and in a gang violence reduction project in East Harlem, I wanted to be useful. At Antioch College in the 1960s, there were frequent opportunities not only to demonstrate but participate in socially beneficial works. For a long time I used my careers as a filmmaker and a writer to propagandize for issues in which I believed, but I was no longer active in community service. Like the Elisa Izquierdo story in Brooklyn, New York that galvanized many into talking about the epidemic of child abuse, my catalyst to action was the news reports in July, 1989 about Bradley McGee, a two-year-old child living in foster care in Lakeland, Florida, who was murdered by his stepfather. Even though his foster parents had pleaded with the judge not to return the child to his mother, he was sent home. Three days later he was dead from a brain hemorrhage after his stepfather dunked him repeatedly head first in a toilet as punishment for soiling his pants. An article mentioned that Bradley had had been waiting to be assigned a Guardian ad Litem. Because of a shortage of advocates, there was nobody to convey the problems the foster parents saw to the judge.

Guardian ad Litem, sometimes abbreviated as GAL, is the legal title for a child advocate in the state of Florida. Other systems refer to their counterparts as Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs). Different districts confer upon their advocates a varying range of powers and responsibilities. My experience is in Florida, which mandates the appointment of a Guardian ad Litem in abuse and neglect judicial proceedings. Volunteer guardians have party status in courtroom proceedings. *Party*, in legal parlance, refers to those by or against whom a legal suit is brought.

Lillian explained the new case to me. "You'd have your hands full with both a dependency and criminal case. The child—she's sixteen and her name is Sandra Shepherd—ran away a few weeks ago and told the people who took her in that her mother's boyfriend had been molesting her. Somebody called the abuse registry and when an investigation began, the man disappeared. Now the mother wants the daughter back, which is the dependency part of the case, and the prosecutor has a warrant out for the perpetrator."

"How can it be a criminal case if the man hasn't been arrested yet?"

"The mother was arrested because she supposedly knew about the abuse and sanctioned it." There was a long pause while I digested this, then Lillian added, "There is an adjudicatory hearing on the mother's charges Monday. If I appoint you, you'll get the papers in time to make an appearance."

I hesitated. Did I have time to handle this? I had corrections for my latest novel to finish and teenage sons of my own. I did have experience with sexually abused children and especially liked teenage girls. I decided to accept the case, if for no other reason than I hated to disappoint Lillian, a young and feisty grandmother, who was raised to be a southern lady by her mother, a doyenne of Atlanta's elite society. Although I've never seen her in white gloves and a straw hat, she wears them in my mental portrait.

There had been no time before the first court appearance to meet Sandra. The only information was what I found in the file which began with a computer printout of the report called into the state-wide abuse registry two weeks earlier. It listed three maltreatments: sexual battery and sexual molestation by the man, and the mother's failure to protect from the infliction of injury. The first two were considered abuse charges, the third a neglect charge. The alleged perpetrators were Ronald S. Grover, whose relationship was "stepfather" and whose whereabouts were unknown, and Florence Shepherd, the mother, with a rural route address.

Next I studied the narrative report, which stated that Mr. Grover had begun fondling Sandra when she was seven. Sandra told the investigator that she had informed her mother of what he was doing, but the mother said they had to live with "Uncle Ronnie" because she could not support them alone. Two days before the official abuse report, Sandra said she was again raped by Uncle Ronnie and ran away. Her mother located her and wanted her to return home. Sandra refused until her mother could promise that Uncle Ronnie had moved out and had agreed to get counseling. The person making the report did not believe the mother would follow through because she had failed to protect her child for nine years. As is the custom, the Guardian ad Litem had access to everything except the identity of the reporter of the abuse.

The police officer's report stated that Sandra had admitted that Mr. Grover had been having sexual intercourse with her for many years, and that the last occurrence had been early the morning she had run away. She said she had been in bed wearing a T-shirt and underwear. Mr. Grover had come into the room and started to kiss her and asked if she loved him. Then he forced one of his fingers into her vagina, rolled her onto her back, pulled down her panties, and performed oral sex on her. She said it lasted about thirty minutes, after which time he went back to bed with her mother, Florence Shepherd. The officer asked Sandra how old she had been when this first happened. She said she had been seven years old and living in Naples, Florida. Initially, Uncle Ronnie would only fondle her with his hands a few times a month, but then they moved to Arizona and it was more often. When she was twelve they returned to Florida, this time to St. Augustine, and he began having intercourse with her which continued when they moved to the present location and only ended the night she left home.

The reporter had referred to Mr. Grover as the "stepfather" while the deputy's notes stated "boyfriend." I hoped subsequent papers would be more consistent, as would Sandra's statements, otherwise the defense attorney could tear the evidence to shreds.

When Sandra was asked what she had told her mother and when, she said she had often complained about Uncle Ronnie and had even run away from home several times when the abuse did not stop. Sandra was questioned about why her mother never called the police. She explained that every time her mother would bring it up, she and Mr. Grover would have a violent argument and Sandra felt like they were blaming her for creating problems. Her mother also said that if Mr. Grover left, they would have no money and no place to live.

The next page of the report dealt with the interview with Florence Shepherd. The officer had spoken to her alone in her dining room. After reading her the Miranda warning from the card, she waived her right to an attorney, and said, that three years earlier Sandra had not come home from school. After she located her daughter, Sandra said Uncle Ronnie wanted to have sex with her. Florence Shepherd discussed it with him and

he agreed he would stop “teasing” her, so Sandra returned. Two years later Sandra told her mother that he was always touching her “boobs.” Once again, when confronted, he agreed to stop. Florence Shepherd said that because the latest incident was the third one, she forced Mr. Grover to leave the house. He said he would not admit or deny it, but that he was going to live in Arizona until things “cooled off.”

The officer asked Florence Shepherd why she never called the authorities, or left Mr. Grover, and she related that she had no money, and also she believed he would stop, because he said he would. When the officer took Florence Shepherd into custody for child abuse, she sobbed and said, “I know Uncle Ronnie is sick and needs help and now maybe he'll get it.”

An affidavit was filed for Ronald S. Grover's arrest for one count of sexual battery with a bond set of \$20,000, but he could not be located. Florence Shepherd's bail had been increased from \$5,000 to \$15,000, which she could not raise.

The second report had been completed by Phoebe Finchley, the protective investigator from DCF, Florida's Department of Health and Social Services (the name has now been changed to the Department of Children and Families or DCF). After the most recent molestation, Sandra had left a note on her bed saying that she was going to stay with Barney and Millie King, the parents of Sandra's boyfriend, Nick, who is in the navy. Then she climbed out her bedroom window, and drove away in her car, a gift from Mr. Grover. Mrs. King said that Sandra had arrived in the middle of the night in tears and explained what Uncle Ronnie had done. Mrs. King comforted Sandra and told her she could remain as long as she liked, but she had to tell her mother so she would not be worried. Sandra didn't want to call her mother, so Mrs. King did. Florence Shepherd hurried came over and wanted Sandra to return home with her, but Sandra refused. Mrs. King became irate and said that if Sandra went back to her house and Uncle Ronnie was still there that she herself would phone the police.

Sandra had stated to the caseworker that Uncle Ronnie had been good to her mother. He had a job as a salesman for a construction company and also received a VA check because he had been disabled in the Korean War. Sandra calculated that she had sex with Mr. Grover a hundred times, but she did not think that he ever ejaculated inside of her.

As part of her assessment, Phoebe Finchley tried to determine the suitability of the King home. Barney King admitted he had two arrests for DUI as well as one unfounded abuse report which involved a dispute over whether his daughter had received proper medical attention. Because there seemed no immediate threat to Sandra's welfare, Phoebe Finchley temporarily placed Sandra with the Kings.

Attached was a copy of Sandra's recent report cards. She was taking an academic program including a foreign language, chemistry, and military science. Her grades for the first semester of her junior year were a strong B average.

Now I knew Sandra was with the Kings; her mother was in jail, the alleged perpetrator was missing. Anxious to meet with my latest guardian child, I tried to contact the Kings but discovered they had no phone and only a post office address. Phoebe Finchley never returned my call and nobody else knew how to contact Sandra, except through the school. Rather than interrupt Sandra's school day to introduce myself for the first time, I had decided to wait until after her mother's appearance before the judge.

A few hours before appearing in court I received a predisposition study from DCF that recommended that Sandra return home when her mother was released from prison as long as there was no contact between the child and Mr. Grover. Sandra had been trying to escape a horrendous situation for a long time and I did not want her to return home unless she was comfortable doing so. With this resolved in my mind, I was as ready for court as I could be on such little notice.

As I walked into the anteroom of Judge Donovan's chambers, a voice boomed behind me. “Which one is the Guardian ad Litem?”

I waved at him tentatively.

“I'm Judd Prescott, Mrs. Shepherd's attorney,” he said, then thrust a document in my hand. “Since you were just appointed, I didn't have a chance to send this to you, please read it and give your opinion.”

I knew Mr. Prescott by reputation and was surprised to see him in juvenile court. When couples of means divorced, they raced each other to hire “Jug” Prescott. The nickname was because of his tendency to go for the jugular and bleed the other party for every last cent.

I glanced at the paper titled, "Answer to Petition for Dependency." In order to safeguard Sandra, the social service agency was going to make her a dependent child, and thus eligible for protective services. If her mother or other family member could not offer a safe home, she could then be adjudicated a foster child and placed in a licensed foster home. There had been seven counts in the petition for dependency that had to be answered by Mrs. Shepherd. She had three choices: to admit it happened, to admit it happened without her knowledge, or to deny the allegation. As to whether Sandra Shepherd had been sexually abused by her mother's paramour, Ronald Grover since the age of seven, the response on behalf of Florence was: Without knowledge of the allegations. On the count that Sandra Shepherd had reported the abuse to her mother, the answer admitted that Sandra Shepherd had informed her mother of some "inappropriate conduct," however it denied that the mother had known of the more serious charges. On the charge that the mother failed to protect her child, the comment was: Denied.

"What does your client want?" I asked Mr. Prescott.

"She wants her child back home where she belongs." He handed another list that he had prepared. "We've arranged bail for Mrs. Shepherd and are making plans for her to move out of the home she shared with Mr. Grover. We will guarantee that the child will have no further contact with Ronald Grover and shall not permit any non-relatives to reside in the home. My client's sister is coming to help out during this transition. We've also scheduled therapy to be provided by the Christian Counseling Service. Of course we have no objection to the child being supervised by the department and routine visits by the Guardian ad Litem." He folded his arms across his chest satisfied that he had covered all bases.

"I've been informed that Sandra won't be here today, and since I haven't met her, I don't know her wishes."

"And I've been informed that she will agree." Jug Prescott smiled as though he had closed a sale for a Lincoln Continental. He leaned closer to me. "But you're still wondering what's going on with the mysterious Uncle Ronnie, right?" I waited. "I spoke to him about an hour ago," he said under his breath. "He's going to turn himself in. We're making a deal, but first the charges against my client have to be dropped and she has to get her daughter back. The way I see it, Mrs. Shepherd is a victim too."

This was a slick way of warning me that if I opposed Sandra's return to her mother, a pedophile might slither away from prosecution. Until that moment Sandra Shepherd, the child for whom I would speak, had been shrouded in a haze of official reports, but the attorney's last maneuver acted like a powerful fan, revealing what had to be done. Before I had a chance to reply to Jug, the bailiff called the case.

At the last moment Florence Shepherd was brought into the courtroom by a prison matron. Her appearance surprised me. She was wearing the usual orange prison garb, but her neck was wrapped in a wide brace and she wore an additional support around her torso. Florence Shepherd would have been considered frail by most standards, but her braces made her seem even more vulnerable. When she sat down at one end of the judge's conference table, she steadied the rolling armchairs and lowered herself gingerly, then winced as she leaned back. Her face had a startled expression with wide brown eyes and high bony cheeks. She looked strained and undernourished, and from my position, I noticed her clenching the bottom edges of the chair's arms.

After DCF's attorney, Calvin Reynolds, presented the desire of his agency for Sandra to be adjudicated dependent and placed under protective services supervision, the question of where Sandra would reside was discussed. Jug Prescott explained that Mrs. Shepherd had found another house to rent and what steps had been taken for her mother to provide a safe home.

The caseworker, Phoebe Finchley, spoke up to say that as long as the perpetrator was at large she did not think Sandra could be safe in her mother's custody. "This is not an isolated incident. The child has been sexually abused on numerous occasions over a five-year period with the mother's knowledge, which means she might continue to put his interests before her daughter's."

Jug Prescott scowled across the table. "My client does not admit she knew anything serious was going on."

Phoebe's mouth twisted as she spoke in a sarcastic tone. "Mrs. Shepherd was told on numerous occasions and all she could do was extract the same weak promise that 'I'll never do it again' from a pedophile."

In a gesture reminiscent of a frightened child, Florence Shepherd wiped away tears with her fist.

Jug waited until everyone noted his client's remorse, then came from a new direction. "Next Monday Mrs. Shepherd is entering University Hospital for an operation on her neck, which was injured in an accident. After she is released, she will have to be immobile for several weeks and will need Sandra at home during her convalescence."

Clever Jug had shifted sympathy from the sexually-abused victim to her mother. I began to understand how a woman with disabilities might be beholden to the man. Still, my focus had never wavered from Sandra, and I saw this tactic as enslaving her further as her mother's nursemaid.

Judge Donovan turned to me. "What is the guardian's position?"

"I do not yet know the expressed wishes of the child, but I will agree with Mr. Prescott's proposal, provided Sandra is willing. However, if she is not, I would like her to remain in either her current placement, or another to be arranged through protective services. I also want a therapist's opinion about Sandra living with her mother."

Judge Donovan nodded to Calvin Reynolds. "Since bail has been arranged, Sandra may return home, but only if she does so voluntarily."

Jug Prescott stood up and helped Mrs. Shepherd to her feet. He gave her arm a paternal pat and said he would make arrangements to pick her up from jail in about an hour.

In the hallway, a tall slender woman with prematurely white hair stepped forward to block Mr. Prescott's path. "I just got here!" she said in a breathless voice. "I'm Constance Blivens."

Jug Prescott clasped her hand like a politician on a street corner. "Glad you could come. Your sister will be free in an hour and our deal has been accepted." He introduced me. "This is your niece's court-appointed guardian, Mrs. Courter. Mrs. Courter, this is Mrs. Shepherd's sister from Arizona, Mrs. Blivens."

Constance Blivens shook her head from side to side. "I don't understand this, none of this."

Jug Prescott excused himself to sign papers regarding Mrs. Shepherd's release.

"My sister loves Sandra more than life itself," Mrs. Blivens continued.

"This must have come as quite a shock to you," I said.

"You don't know...nobody could know. First our father left us and then, when Flo was twelve, Mother died. I was in my third year at the university, but I came home and took care of her until she graduated high school. Then, when I married, she came to live with me and my husband until she met up with Oliver." Her voiced seethed as she said the name of Sandra's father. "Flo would never have done anything to harm her child. That's why I agreed to pay for the best lawyer."

"Where are you staying?"

"I'll be taking Flo back to her house, or rather, Ronnie's house, then helping her get ready to move. When do you think Sandra will come home?"

"I'm going to see her today. Give me your phone number and I'll call you."

After I turned off the highway, the dirt road split in two. Phoebe's directions to the trailer park where the Kings lived had not mentioned which fork to take. The right hand one led to a large mobile home with red trim, but there were no cars and the doors were locked. I got back into my car and turned down the other road, which ended in front of a trailer that had sprouted three additions. A five-year-old boy with a buzz cut was pushing a toy tractor through a sand pile. "Does Sandra Shepherd live here?"

"Yeah, but she's at tennis."

Millie King came to the door and peered at me with suspicion. "I would have called, but I didn't have a phone number," I said from the path, then explained who I was.

"Well, it is about time someone was on Sandra's side, besides us, that is. What they've put that girl through is something terrible. You c'mon in and wait for her if you want."

I followed Mrs. King through a screen porch that was set up as a bedroom to a narrow living room lined with couches and lazy-boy rockers. The television was tuned to an old episode of *MASH*. She introduced me to her husband, Barney, who was seated in a recliner with his feet elevated. "My husband's on kidney dialysis and might need a transplant. I used to work as a practical nurse, but he's my full time job, him and the kids of course." As she chuckled, her large breasts heaved up and down. "Want a cold drink?"

I accepted a glass of iced tea, then explained the role of a Guardian ad Litem to the Kings.

“You went to court today?” Barney King asked me. I nodded. “Can she still stay with us?” I explained that the judge had said that Sandra could return home under supervision, but only if she agreed.

“Supervision!” Millie King spat. “That’s a laugh!”

“You tell me how a mother could not know that something like that was going on right under her nose,” Barney said. “Even we could sense something wasn’t right there.” He glanced at his wife and asked, “When did Nick get so furious?”

“Right after Christmas. His leave was up the next day and he had gone with Sandra to a movie. When they got back, Nick took a glass of water out to Sandra in the car. I asked him if Sandra was all right. He said she was upset about something that happened with her family. Then he left to take her home.” Millie King took a long swallow of tea. “I couldn’t sleep until Nick got back. After he drove in, I looked out the window again and saw him kick the tree in anger and wondered if they had been fighting. I said, ‘You want to tell me about it, son?’ and he said no, everything was fine between them, but he had to keep her confidence. Then, he hugged me tight and said, ‘I love her Mom. I don’t know what I’d do if anything ever happened to her.’”

“We knew then something peculiar was going on,” Barney said, “but Nick wouldn’t say another word about it.”

“That was the last time the kids were together before he went back to his unit. So when Sandra showed up at three o’clock in the morning a few weeks ago, I knew something terrible was wrong.”

“I’m glad she had you to come to.”

“There are lots of people who care about Sandra,” Millie said. “When her mother was arrested, it couldn’t be kept a secret any longer. I told Sandra she didn’t have to go to school that day and called her guidance counselor. You know what happened? Her girl friends came by with a cake that read: We Love You. They brought ice cream and pop and promised they’d protect her from nosy questions.”

“Have you ever met the man?”

“Uncle Ronnie!” Millie’s voice was shrill. Even the mother calls him that.” She wrinkled her nose in disgust. “He’s about twenty years older than Florence and has kids almost her age.”

Barney lit a cigarette. “If you want my opinion,” he said after inhaling, “that man picked Florence so he could have his way with her daughter.” He sighed. “From that point on the mother became the child and Sandra became the wife, if you know what I mean.”

Millie asked her husband for a cigarette and began puffing rapidly. “That man bought Sandra a car, lots of gowns, and even brings her flowers, like roses, all the time. Not the mother, mind you, he’d buy flowers for the kid.”

“He bought her silence,” Barney seethed.

“Why do you think Sandra finally told?” I asked.

“Because her love for Nick made her strong,” Millie answered “And thank God she did.” She shuddered.

A car turned into the lane and approached the house. “Here she comes,” Barney said, looking at his watch.

Millie went out to greet Sandra and explained that she had a visitor. Then she came in, looked as if she might back out the door, then sat stiffly on the couch opposite me.

I had expected someone who resembled her easily manipulated mother, but Sandra had large bones and a square, determined face. Her honey-blonde hair was tied back in a jaunty pony tail and she wore black slacks and a tennis team shirt that was the same teal blue as her almond-shaped eyes. If she resembled anyone, it was her formidable Aunt Constance.

I hurried through the explanation of who I was. “I have no interest in what your mother or her lawyer or aunt or the prosecutor wants. I will take my cues from you. I’ve read your file and discovered you are an excellent student so I am sure you will be the best judge of where you should live.”

Sandra looked past me at a spot on the wall. “Nobody ever does what I want.”

“That is about to change.”

Sandra’s shoulders sagged and her mouth relaxed.

“You look worn out, honey,” Millie crooned.

"I am. The school resource officer told me they might be picking up Uncle Ronnie in the next day or so." She turned to me. "Does that mean I'll have to see him when they arrest him?"

"No, I don't think you'll have to face him except in a trial, but I'll check to be sure." I asked Sandra to come out to my car so I could give her some phone numbers. "Call me anytime you have a question or want to see me." Then I asked what else I could do for her.

"I want to know what happens with Uncle Ronnie and my mother and everything. I don't want to be the last one to be told."

I explained what had happened in court. "Are you willing to move into the new house with your mother?"

"Will Aunt Constance be there?"

"I think she is staying to help your mother through surgery." Sandra leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes. "At least there will be someone else to put up with Mother's complaints." She made a sour face. "But I won't go back to Uncle Ronnie's house!" she shouted.

"Then you are not going."

"Can't they force me to leave here?"

"No, Sandra. And if they try to, call me immediately."

For a moment her expression registered skepticism, then she tilted her head and gave me a wry smile.

That evening I could not put Sandra out of my mind. She was not the first sexually-abused teen I had met, but there was an incongruity about her: a toughness, a resolve...and what else was it? An acceptance? She had lived with Uncle Ronnie for many years before telling an outsider. Clearly her mother was a co-conspirator. The three of them had a bargain, and for the longest time, Sandra had kept her part.

The threesome, the deal, even the outcome did not seem unfamiliar. Where had I heard this story before? *Lolita*! I found my copy of the Nabokov's novel, the seminal tale of a older man's desire for a young girl, and read the opening words: "Lolita, light of my life...my sin...my soul... Lo. Lee. Ta."

When I had discovered *Lolita* in high school, I had been riveted by the sensuous, sympathetic narrative of Humbert Humbert, his lust so palpable, so urgent, so stunningly elucidated from a physical and emotional point of view that I had rooted for him to triumph over the vapid, sexually precocious and bratty Delores Haze. Later, with my perspective as a novelist, I had come to admire the author's brilliant evocation of a deranged mind and felt envious of page after page of luscious prose.

Curiously I found the book more startling in the era of headlines documenting the urges of Woody Allen and the obsessive liaison of Amy Fisher and Joey Buttafuoco. The first time I had read it furtively and had been enthralled by its window into a forbidden world. Reading the fictional premise in the forward as a mature adult—and parent—I was appalled that I ever had been sympathetic to the protagonist. I had forgotten that Humbert Humbert, the "pseudonymous" narrator, had died of coronary thrombosis, a few days before his trial. He had left this memoir, which his heirs decided to publish because it made a classic psychiatric case history, and also because they considered it a transcendent work of art as well as a lesson in ethics as a study about a selfish mother, her contrary child, and the covetous maniac. The tome was supposedly made public to warn against "dangerous trends" and "point out potent evils."

I had never before thought of *Lolita* as a morality play, but even in the opening pages the edict was clear: the wages of sin were indeed death. The story, which I had recollected as a droll, satiric view of American life—a premise reinforced by my recall of the Kubrick movie—I now saw as tragic. Humbert and Lolita both died, Lolita's baby was stillborn, Humbert's childhood sweetheart had died of typhus, and his first wife had succumbed in childbirth. Lolita's mother had an accident, her friend died of cancer, Lolita's first love was killed in Korea, and Humbert's rival was murdered by him. Reading the book with Sandra in mind, I realized that to Humbert, Lolita was an object to be conquered. Cruelty and power were the cudgels behind the silky sentences. Any illusions about the suave Mr. Humbert were dispelled forever as I ticked off the characteristics of a classic pedophile, ruthless in his pursuit of his nymphet.

The conclusion of the fictional foreword unsettled me further. "'Lolita' should make all of us—parents, social workers, educators—apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world."

The next morning I called the police department. "Sex Crimes, Officer Moline, how may I help you?"

"This is Gay Courter, Guardian ad Litem for Sandra Shepherd. Remember we worked together on the Stevenson case?"

"Hey, good to hear from you. Have you heard about the arrest?" he asked with a snicker. I responded that I had not. "If this isn't one for the books, I don't know what is! Last night the perp shows up at the sheriff's department, and says that after consulting with Jug Prescott, he had decided to turn himself in. He comes to my office and can't wait to confess to molesting Sandra Shepherd, and says he will plead guilty to spare the kid and the mother any more problems because he loves them."

"Where's he been the past few weeks?"

"He claims he's been hospitalized in Arizona. He has colon cancer, hasn't long to live, says he's Catholic, and wants to get everything in order."

"Where is he now?"

"He did not pass go and went directly to jail. At first appearance this morning the judge set his bail at \$20,000, and it looks like in until arraignment."

"If he pleads guilty, will Sandra have to testify?"

"No, but don't hold your breath. Once he gets a defense attorney he'll change his plea. They always do."

"What's he like?"

"Not what you'd expect. He's well-spoken, gentlemanly, and sounded sorry for making so many people unhappy. If he does plead guilty, he'd get at least ten years, and with his medical condition, he would never get out alive."

"Has anyone told Sandra?"

"I was going to call the school resource officer."

"Do you mind if I do it? I promised to keep her informed."

I had an appointment to meet Mrs. Shepherd, but the high school was not too far out of my way. I called the guidance office to see if they could locate Sandra for me. Her counselor, Mrs. Exley, came on the line and said that Sandra was home with the flu. There was no time to drive out to the King's trailer, so I headed for the Shepherd house in the opposite direction.

"With his medical condition, he would never get out alive" echoed in my mind and I was reminded of Humbert Humbert dying in jail.

Constance Blivens let me in to the ranch house set in the midst of a stand of southern pines. Florence Shepherd was lying on the sofa cosseted by pillows under her legs and a heating pad on her neck. As soon as I sat down, Constance excused herself to pack up the bedroom. Even though they were moving, the house was immaculate, with bare countertops and the wooden floors polished to a high sheen.

"I don't know why Sandra had to do this right now," her mother said in a little-girl voice. "She knew how important this surgery was because it is my last shot to have a normal life."

"I hope it works out for you," I replied, then after a few beats asked, "Do you know what happened last night?" Florence gave me a blank stare. "Mr. Grover turned himself in." Still no response. "Mr. Prescott advised him to do so, isn't that right?"

"I don't know about that." Florence closed her eyes. "Why isn't Sandra here? She belongs with me."

"Sandra doesn't want to return to this house."

"That's because she is under the Kings' influence. If it weren't for them, none of this would have happened. They allow the kids to drink. Millie has this rule that if they hang their car keys on a hook and promise not to drive, they can have beer." Florence stopped because the phone was ringing. I offered to bring the portable phone from the kitchen over to her, but she waved me off. "My sister will get it." She waited until she heard Constance talking, then spoke louder, as if to mask something I might overhear. "If she doesn't watch her step, she is going to blow all my plans for her."

"What do you want for Sandra?"

"At her age she should have many boyfriends, not just one, but mainly she should work on her goals for college." The phone rang again, but was quickly picked up. Then Constance came into the room.

"He got his medication?" Florence asked. Constance nodded. Florence gave a sigh of relief. "Uncle Ronnie called from the jail because he was worried he had not been given his pills on time." Florence

Shepherd seemed to have forgotten that she had not known that Mr. Grover had turned himself in. She leaned back on her pillows. "If Sandra had only told me what she has been telling strangers, I could have helped. But I never knew what was going on."

"Sandra claims she tried to talk to you about it."

"All she said was that Uncle Ronnie had touched her boobs and her butt. Believe me, I'm her mother, and if I had ever seen one gesture that was worse than some teasing, I would have done something about it."

Florence tried to sit up, but winced from the pain, and lay back again. "I don't understand why Sandra doesn't love me any more."

"Many teenagers pull back from their parents at this age. It is a way of expressing independence."

"But we were like sisters and she used to confide everything to me. I told her that I didn't want her to be sexually active, but if she was, she could come to me so I could arrange birth control."

"Some girls her age don't want to discuss their intimate life with their mothers, no matter how much they love them. But don't you think Sandra may have had even more substantial reasons not to want to tell you everything?"

"Why?" Florence asked with a childish whine.

"Because of the situation with Mr. Grover."

"None of this would have happened if it weren't for the Kings meddling in our business. It's like the pot calling the kettle black. Millie comes off as oh-so-pure, but she didn't marry Nick's father until she had his third child." She choked back a sob. "I've lost Sandra and now I've lost Uncle Ronnie too. He wasn't perfect, but he was good to us..." She couldn't go on for a few minutes. Finally she managed, "Please, let her come home to me."

"I'm not trying to keep her away, but I think it will be best if she comes home when she is ready."

"But the Kings are pressuring her against me."

"I don't think that's the problem."

"No? Then explain it to me." She looked up with the pleading eyes of a young child yearning for an impossible gift.

"Well," I began with some hesitation, "it is as though Sandra has been in an accident and has been bruised and shaken. If her car had hit a tree, you would understand why she might not want a hug because of bruised ribs, or didn't want to get back into a car because of fear, wouldn't you?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Perhaps the therapist will be able to help you both sort your feelings."

As I drove home, I wondered how was it possible for Uncle Ronnie to have had sex with a young girl over a period of years without her mother knowing? You couldn't even walk around on those bare wooden floors without them squeaking, although there must have been times when Florence was not home, or when she slept soundly, so the opportunity was there. By giving Sandra a car, clothes, even flowers, Uncle Ronnie had demonstrated affection for her. The flowers... I tried to imagine the scene: the older man bringing the child a bouquet. Was it an innocent, charming gesture, a flirtatious proposition, or an apology? And what about the overt touching of her buttocks, her breasts? Some families tolerate sexual teasing and perhaps he had meant it as a joke, if an imprudent one. Or maybe it had been done in earnest and the "game" was to deceive Florence.

Uncle Ronnie had his reasons for covering up his activities, but why would Sandra? Was she frightened of the man or more concerned that she and her mother could not survive without his support? I sensed that Florence, Constance, and Ronald Grover formed one axis while Sandra was moving to create a new one for herself with Nick at the fulcrum and his family helping to balance her side. There was good reason for Florence to mistrust the Kings because they offered Sandra her respite from her peculiar situation at home.

By my calculations Ronald Grover had been in his mid-fifties when he met a younger, healthier Florence Shepherd. With her flat chest and scrawny limbs, her figure had an adolescent appeal and her manner was infantile at times. If this was a man who preferred prepubescence, Florence might have satisfied his fantasies—at least in the dark. Even better, she came with a daughter in tow. He would take care of everything: the bills, the decisions, and they would be grateful and dependent. Had Ronald Grover planned this with a Humbert-like premeditation or couldn't he constrain himself when he had felt the compulsion to touch the child?

In *Lolita* there is an erotic scene on a quiet Sunday morning wherein the narrator intercepts an apple from Lolita. During their tussle, the child stretches her legs across Humbert's lap. In this delicious position, Humbert feels every breath, every twitch, every downy hair on the nymphet's supple legs until he reaches a heated pulsation that makes him oblivious to anything but his churning desires. Does Lolita sense the pedophile trying to control his inner turmoil? We are told how he felt, but how did she feel?

I imagined the enigmatic Uncle Ronnie, a man of taste and charm, brushing against Sandra, patting her bottom, kissing her goodnight. Was Sandra aware of his outward restraint? Eventually the temptation had been too much for him and he had made his approach. He had been smart. He had never pushed her, never hurt her. She might even have found his fondling pleasurable, as Lolita supposedly did.

Then one day Sandra grew up and resisted. But Uncle Ronnie knew how to control her, because like Lolita, Sandra and her mother needed him. However Lolita had been different. Her mother had died in an accident, leaving Humbert to be her *de facto* "father." Unlike Lolita, Sandra still had a mother, if a disabled one—a mother who knew, but didn't know. Florence couldn't allow herself to know. Or she couldn't go on.

When Woody Allen confessed to his affair with his wife's adopted daughter, some upstanding folks claimed that this was not incest because Soon-Yi was not a blood relation to either him or Mia Farrow. Sandra was no relation to Uncle Ronnie either, nor was Lolita to Humbert. Nabokov called this the "parody of incest." These three men had accepted the emotional role of not only parent-figure, but of lover to the child's mother. (Joey Buttafuoco, however, was just interested in Amy Fisher, perhaps disqualifying her from holding the "Long Island Lolita" title) According to Freud all little girls desire their father's (of father figure's) undivided attention, but the fantasy is normally played out at the age of six, not sixteen. Neither Mr. Humbert nor Mr. Allen had been branded rapists because they seemed amiable and loving; the girls believed to be eager to experiment. They may have entered into the transaction with a conscious willingness to learn, to experience satisfaction, to please and curry favor. Much later—as the reality of how they are valued hits them—will they begin to pay for their actions with depressive symptoms? The older men should have predicted disaster, but their common sense was not only supplanted by the immediacy of their needs, but also their denial that the girls were anything more than love objects. Humbert and Woody and Uncle Ronnie are the ultimate narcissists, unable to have empathy for their victims. Soon-Yi and Sandra, Mia and Florence, Woody and Uncle Ronnie all played out the roles Nabokov delineated as "the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac."

Yes, Sandra wanted the pretty dresses, the car, and she knew that her mother was unsuited to life on her own, especially after the accident, which she, unlike Lolita's mother, managed to survive. Sandra knew that she fulfilled a desire that her mother could not, and she was so special that Uncle Ronnie would do anything she wanted—as long as she didn't tell.

Sandra was the second young woman I represented whose "father" was indicted for sexual battery. Alicia Stevenson had been groomed by her father to be his sexual companion. [See "[What Happened Next](#)" link for a surprising development in this case 10 years later.] After I had known Alicia for many months, the real horror of this incestuous relationship came into focus. Alicia's self-esteem was bundled with her sexuality. For years she had been rewarded with love, privileges, and material goods for allowing her father to molest her. Most of the time the sex had been gentle, and to his twisted mind, consensual. Alicia had found sex with her father to be pleasurable and something she may even have initiated once in a while. As she matured and began to become interested in boys her own age, she began to realize that her relationship with her father was taboo. Even so, she never tried to resist him, nor did she voluntarily confide in anyone because by then, she had found perverse pleasure defying the rules of society, being a romantic outlaw. It was only when her father objected to her seeing boys her own age that she complained to a friend's mother. It wasn't the sexual act that was ugly, but rather his corruption of love and nurturing into sexual performance. Sandra seemed to have an inner strength that Alicia, who had little self-worth other than her sexual prowess, had lacked. Even though Florence was an inadequate model for a mother, she did profess to love her daughter. Alicia's mother had disappeared ten years earlier. If Sandra deserted her mother, she would lose the last vestige of unconditional love. To play it safe, she was juggling two families. The nymphet had matured, fallen in love with a boy her own age, and she wanted to reclaim herself. She had confided in her boyfriend and he had not only given her courage, but promised that no matter what happened she would have a family—his family—to support her. But in case that did not work out, she would still have her mother.

As soon as I arrived home, my husband said, “Sandra has been trying to reach you every fifteen minutes since five. She's calling from a neighbor's house and you can't call her back.”

I put dinner in the oven and had started on a salad when the phone rang. “Sandra? I tried to find you at school today.”

“I stayed home sick.” She was sniffing so noisily I could not tell if it was her cold or crying. “Mrs. Finchley told Millie that I have to go home, but you said I wouldn't have to.”

“I'll be over in a few minutes,” I said. I gave my son instructions for finishing our meal, then rushed out of the house.

When I arrived at the Kings' trailer, Sandra was standing barefoot in the hallway. Her eyes were puffy, her hair was tangled and her nose was ruddy and sore. So far I had never talked with her alone. “Would you mind coming with me for a while?” I asked.

“Sure.” Sandra picked up her sneakers in her hand, which she put on once she was in my car. (Note: Since this was written, the laws in Florida have changed and now Guardians ad Litem are no longer able to transport children in their cars. This has been a great loss because we are much more constrained about where we can meet and see our youth and while it may not make a big difference with small children, it is impossible to form the trusting relationship with teenagers that was so helpful in many of my early cases.)

At MacDonald's Sandra said she didn't feel like eating. I ordered an orange juice for her. I asked for a tall cup of ice and poured the orange juice in it. She took a few sips, winced as it burned her throat, then gave me a challenging stare.

“I told you that you would not have to return to the old house, right?” She nodded. “And now DCF wants you to go there. Did they say when?” She shook her head from side to side. “Then, if they did not specify tonight, forget about it. I can't reach Phoebe Finchley until tomorrow, but I will find her and set her straight. Could you tell me one more time why you don't want to go to Mr. Grover's house?”

“It's not that I don't want to go there, I just don't want to sleep in that bed again. I don't mind going during the day to help out. I've already done most of the packing, except for the kitchen and draining the waterbed. The problem is that no matter how much I do Mother always wants more.”

“How much longer will it be until they move?”

“They'll be in the new house Saturday night.”

“Do you have any objections to going back then?”

She was quiet for a moment. “Yes,” she whispered.

“You're not ready...” I suggested.

“It's not that, it's that I know what will happen. When my mother went for medical tests a few months ago, she said we would go up and stay in a motel near the university, but at the last minute she changed her mind. She was so scared she came and slept in my bed. I couldn't sleep all night, but I couldn't complain because my mother was going to have tests the next day. I'm sure she'll pull the same stunt before her surgery.”

In this role reversal the daughter was the caretaker, the mother the dependent.

“My mother knows just how to get to me,” Sandra continued. “Last time I saw her, she accused me of not loving her and tried to get me to come home right then. What could I say? I mean, my mother was lying there, in pain, getting ready to be cut open in a few days. I knew that wasn't the time to talk back—” She gave a little snort and added, “Although I sure felt like it!”

“Your mother has a lot of problems, and I don't just mean with her neck,” I replied.

“You aren't kidding!” Sandra whistled between her teeth. “Even her psychiatrist told me that.”

“She sees a psychiatrist?”

“Yes, for pain management.”

“She has relied on you for a long time.”

“Yeah.”

“And Uncle Ronnie,” I said. Sandra looked out the window. “You and I don't have to talk about that now, or ever. What happened with him doesn't matter to me, but together we're going to have to get through the legal process. It's like we're on a train trip and we won't be able to get off until it stops at the last station.” Sandra watched me with renewed intensity. “I want you to know that I have read the police file,” I whispered. “Because Mr. Grover voluntarily turned himself in and confessed, there is no need to go over the details until it

is required by the court.” I paused. “I was the guardian of another young woman who testified in a case like this. She went through some rough times, but she did put it behind her and got on with her life.”

“It’s helped me to know that people like Roseanne Barr and Oprah Winfrey told their stories. They made it, and I will too!” Sandra’s jaw clenched and she leaned forward. “I’m going to get that military scholarship and be trained for a high-tech career.”

“You’re remarkable. Did you know that?” She was very quiet so I continued, “The issue is still where you are going to live.”

“I want to remain with the Kings until Mother is released from the hospital. By that time she’ll be in the new house.”

“That’s reasonable. I’ll phone Phoebe Finchley in the morning.”

Sandra looked into the bottom of her empty juice cup. “You’re sure they can’t force me to go there?”

“They’d have to get a court order and that would take more than a week. By that time it will be a moot point.”

The following week I took the criminal training class and learned more about working with child victims and their families from attorneys, law enforcement, and judges. Two days after that Deputy Moline phoned me and said he needed Sandra for a sworn statement at the prosecutor’s office and asked if would I accompany her. Sandra was relieved when I explained that I would be with her the whole time.

When I arrived at the courthouse, Grace Chandler, the prosecutor I had worked with on the Stevenson case, was standing by the receptionist’s desk. “I’m here for the Grover case. Are you handling it?”

“Will Yost has that assignment. You’ll like him.” She guided me to his office and introduced me. Will Yost pushed back a shock of thick blonde hair and gave me a charming, poster-boy smile. Grace Chandler asked, “What are the charges?”

Will Yost looked down at the papers then up at Deputy Moline, who had a mischievous grin. “When I took custody of Mr. Grover he admitted to ‘whatever she said I did.’ ”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Grace Chandler responded with some irritation.

“That’s why we need to interview Miss Shepherd,” Mr. Yost said in a monotone. “Where is she?”

“She was coming in her own car and must be running late,” I replied.

“What can you tell me about the victim?” Mr. Yost asked me.

“Sandra Shepherd is very mature for a sixteen-year-old girl and she doesn’t act like a victim. But that doesn’t mean she isn’t entitled to every courtesy, every protection.” I made eye contact with Grace. “I want to be called for any depositions regarding her or any other witnesses, including her mother, the King family members, and anyone else associated with the case. I want Sandra informed of every step. I have the feeling that Mr. Grover has assets and I want these to be used to pay restitution, reparations, whatever.”

Will Yost glanced from me to Grace Chandler, who spoke first. “I don’t have any problem with that.”

I excused myself to locate Sandra, who was pacing in the lobby. “Will I have to see Uncle Ronnie?” she asked with a quavering voice.

I gestured across the street to the jail. “He’s locked up there and will be for a long time to come.”

A cloud passed across Sandra’s face and she gave a little shiver. I steered her into the elevator.

“This is Sandra Shepherd,” I said and introduced her around.

Grace said she would stay for a while and took a seat on the far side of the room. Sandra and I sat on chairs facing the assistant prosecutor’s desk and Deputy Moline stood to one side. Will Yost turned on the tape recorder and had Sandra swear to tell the truth.

“What happened the last time you were with Mr. Grover?” he began.

Sandra answered in a quiet, deliberate voice. She described how Uncle Ronnie had come into her room, what she had been wearing, that he had pulled down her panties and put his finger into her vagina. Then he had performed oral sex on her.

“Did he ask you to do the same to him?” She shook her head no. “Please speak out loud for the tape recorder.”

“No, he didn’t have me do anything to him.”

I noticed Will looking in Grace's direction. She held up two fingers, which meant they already had Mr. Grover on two counts of unlawful acts.

"Did he ever have full sexual intercourse with you?"

"Yes, many times."

"When did that begin?"

"After we moved to Daytona Beach."

"How old were you?"

"Thirteen."

Grace Chandler frowned. Crimes against children under twelve brought much harsher sentences. Mr. Yost went on to establish where the various acts took place, what dates, and ages. Like many children, Sandra referred to being in the fifth grade or seventh grade, so I made a chart showing how old she would have been at different times of those school years and where she lived. Eventually she was able to recall several instances of sexual intercourse which took place in their current home by establishing the dates within a few weeks of a holiday or birthday.

Deputy Moline, Will Yost, and Grace Chandler then consulted Florida's sentencing guidelines. "I think we have the best shot with four counts, three for sexual activity with a child between eleven and eighteen and one lewd or lascivious act in the presence of a child under sixteen," Will concluded. "We can go with one count for the finger penetration, one count for the cunnilingus, one count for sexual intercourse, and one for placing her hand on his penis."

"Considering his medical condition, he'll never get out alive," the deputy commented.

"How do you feel about that?" I asked Sandra.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She fumbled for her purse, but had no tissues. I passed her some and kept a hand on her arm for support. Nobody in the room spoke. I tried to put her distress into words. "You became upset when you heard Uncle Ronnie might die in prison."

"My mother will never forgive me."

"What about you? Do you want to see him punished?"

"I just don't want him to bother me any more."

"Bastard," Deputy Moline muttered under his breath.

"But I still don't want him to be killed in prison," she sputtered. "My mother told me that other prisoners go after who've had sex with children."

"That's not your problem," Will Yost responded. "I need to know if you are willing to testify in front of a jury."

"I thought Mr. Grover had pled guilty so she could avoid that," I interjected.

"He did, but that was before he spent any time with a defense attorney."

"Which means what?" I asked.

"He could switch to not guilty," Grace Chandler explained.

"Even get out on bail," the prosecutor added with an ominous edge.

"I'll testify," Sandra responded in a husky voice. "If only so he can't do it to anyone else."

"How's the Shepherd case coming?" Lillian asked when she checked in with me. After giving her an update, she focused on Mr. Grover. "What is that man really like?"

"I've never met him."

"Aren't you curious?"

"He sounds like a creep, although he must have some charm to have manipulated her and her mother for so long. I suppose I'll see him at the next hearing."

"You'll never get him to talk when his attorney's around."

"What am I supposed to do, knock on his cell door, and ask if he'll let me in?"

"Eventually somebody is going to accuse Sandra of lying. Hearing his side of the story might give you some ammunition for later."

"Will they let me in the jail?"

"Yes, with your court order on the case."

"Wouldn't we have to notify his attorney?"

"No, but he also doesn't have to talk to you."

"You want to go with me?" I asked.

"Sure." Lillian said. "We can compare impressions."

Prepared with my court order, official Guardian ad Litem card, and driver's license, I met Lillian at the county jail the next day. The matron in the reception area looked at our forms, then at us, then back at the papers. I pointed to where it stated that I was "a party pursuant to the Florida Rules of Criminal Procedures 3.030."

The matron still was unconvinced. "Why don't you call the prosecutor's office?" Lillian suggested.

The matron picked up the phone. Through the plate glass partition, we couldn't overhear any of the conversation, but we did observe her reading from the court order. When she came out of the locked room, the matron said, "You can come in, but the prisoner doesn't have to see you if he doesn't want to."

We were instructed to leave our portfolios and handbags inside the matron's office, then we passed through a metal detector, were frisked with a hand-held device, then patted down. A guard unlocked the thick metal door, had us stand inside the corridor, then the gate clicked behind us with an electronic finality.

"Wait here," the guard told us, "I'll see if he'll come down to talk with you." He unlocked a door to what looked like a broom closet.

Inside was a small table with a hard wooden chair on either side. The space was so narrow the chairs were set on an angle in order to fit. I stood with my back against the wall facing the doorway, while Lillian took the chair nearest the corridor. The room was claustrophobic and the airflow nonexistent. Several other guards walked past, as did a man in a suit, who looked like a lawyer, and various prisoners. Each stopped to gape at the two ladies in the closet, then shuffled past.

A slender man wearing the orange prison uniform stuck his head in the doorway. "Yep, they's the ones," the guard behind him said and, in a practiced herding technique, blocked the man's way so he could only move into the closet.

Ronald Grover looked straight ahead toward the far wall, avoiding the corner where I was standing and the niche where Lillian was sitting.

"I'm Gay Courter, the volunteer Guardian ad Litem appointed by the court to represent Sandra's best interest in both the dependency and criminal proceedings," I blurted in a rush. "And this is Mrs. Elliott, my case manager."

Mr. Grover's deep blue eyes flashed from one of us to the other. He stood ramrod straight. His hair was trimmed to an even half inch around his head. Grey hairs alternated with black in military precision. His nails were well manicured and glossed with a clear lacquer. "I don't believe that I am required to speak to you," he began in a rich tenor with roots not far from Boston.

"No, sir, you are not," I began. "We're not here to question you about your role in the case. We're here because we want to understand Sandra better."

His eyes flashed from left to right, then he turned to see if the guard remained behind him. "May I go back upstairs if I want?"

"I guess," the guard replied.

I looked toward Lillian, hoping she might interject something that would convince Mr. Grover to remain. She lifted her shoulders in a lady-like shrug.

Mr. Grover took a step toward the door. I leaned away from the wall. "Just one thing, Mr. Grover, would you know why Sandra might make those accusations against a man like you?" If this was a ploy, it came as a surprise to me too, for I had not planned the question, but there had been something in Mr. Grover's dignified demeanor that made me sense that he believed he had been wronged.

"Might as well give you some answers, if it will help the kid. God knows I've loved her and tried to make a home for her." I nodded to encourage him. "Her mother is the kindest, most gentle, most soft-hearted woman in the world. She does not deserve any of this." He took one step into the closet. "I have offered to take it on myself so she won't have to suffer. I'm an old man, I've lived my life, and my medical condition is so severe I'm not going to be around much longer."

"You staying?" the guard asked him.

“What the hell! The truth never hurt anyone.” Mr. Grover took the seat on the opposite side of the table, but there wasn't enough room for him to tuck his legs under it. I moved the table against the far wall, and half sat, half leaned against it. Lillian adjusted her chair so it was on an angle facing both of us. The guard started to close the door, but Lillian waved for him to leave it open.

“I'll be down the hall,” the guard said.

“I'm sorry you have been ill. What is the matter, if you don't mind saying?” I asked.

“What isn't the matter?” he replied with a sardonic chuckle. “All systems have broken down. For starters I have diabetes, high blood pressure, diverticulitis, and now colon cancer. I bleed so much from the rectum the bathroom looks like a crime scene. When I made the deal with Florence's attorney, he said I'd receive good treatments and might even be placed in a prison hospital. Ha! They have a case of active TB upstairs and they haven't isolated him or gotten his medication. Not that I'm going to be around long enough for it to matter to me.” He shook his head. “The charges against me are absurd. If they looked at my medical records, they would see that it is physically impossible for me to have done what they said I have done.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“For more than two years I've had severe arteriosclerosis. Do you know what the result of that is?” I shook my head negatively. “You should have looked at my records and come better prepared.” Not having a response, I waited for him to continue. “I have no pulse below the waist.” His lips twisted from side to side as he watched my reaction.

Forcing myself not to avoid eye contact, I examined him more closely. His skin was smooth and firm, his facial coloring had the burnished veneer of a gentleman who played golf or tennis. His compact, lean body seemed fit for a man of sixty-two. The pumpkin jail garb fit him almost as well as a jumpsuit tailored for a trim astronaut. In a suit and tie he would look like a distinguished businessman. With a European accent he could be an acceptable version of Mr. Humbert.

Lillian piped in with chirpy, country-club voice. “Does that mean that you are impotent?”

“What do you think it means?” he replied caustically.

I reminded myself that the first two criminal charges were for oral or digital sex, but since my goal was to keep him talking, I didn't challenge him. “Then why do you think Sandra made the accusations?” I continued.

“There were no problems until she took up with that King boy. This whole business is a fabrication by that family.”

“Why would they want to do that?”

“Because her mother and I are too restrictive. We have plans for Sandra's future, but she would rather screw around than do her school work. This is just a smoke screen so we won't get on her case for not doing her assignments.”

“That seems a rather drastic step,” Lillian said in a doubting tone.

“Do you know how this came about?” Mr. Grover grunted in attack.

“Someone called the DCF abuse hotline,” I replied.

“At least you have done some homework!” he said. “Don't you realize who placed the call?”

“The reporter's name is secret, even from us.”

“Not much of a researcher, are you?” he asked. “How about Mr. Nick King? And to think that I stepped in and helped that kid out of a jam last year!”

“In what way?” I asked.

“Didn't you hear about the incident at Sawgrass Beach around Easter?”

“I don't think so...”

He shook his head as if he could not believe I was so naive. “You don't remember the gang rape of that foreign student?” I shook my head. If it had been in the local papers, the names had not been released, but still I should have recalled something that sensational.

“They did a pretty good job of hushing it up after the first few days. The girl's family didn't want her reputation ruined. But Nick was there. He claims he never participated, but admitted he was a bystander. He had his piece of the pie, but enough other guys took the rap, he didn't have to. I used my connections to get his name dropped from the list, then when he applied to the navy, I had to go back and help clean up his record. I was in the navy too, by the way, so what I said had some clout. Now look where my generosity got me!”

The walls seemed to be pressing tighter. Ronald Grover's sour breath was directed at me. The corner of the table pressed into my lower back, but if I bent forward in a more comfortable position, I would come in contact with his looming body. By moving sideways I was closer to Lillian, but then I had to twist my head to look at Mr. Grover.

"It's not just the kid, it's the whole damn family," he continued in a menacing tone. "The Kings have no morals. That's why they sponsored the abortion." His eyes swiveled from me to Lillian. "I see she didn't tell you about that either. What a surprise! You're nice ladies; you mean well. You think you are doing a fine job of rescuing poor, abused children, and maybe part of the time you do, but sometimes you make mistakes. Sometimes you miss the essential facts because you are blinded by your desire to do good. You don't mean anyone any harm, but the victim in this case isn't some poor little girl. The victim is right here in this room spilling out his guts to you."

"Sandra had an abortion?" My choked voice betrayed my shock.

"Figure it out for yourself. Nick was home for Thanksgiving, then again in December. Probably knocked her up on turkey day and come Christmas they figured out that Santa had another surprise bundle for them. Without a word to her mother or me, the Kings took her to a clinic near the university. I have copies of the release forms filled by Millie King, only she fraudulently signed herself 'Florence Shepherd'. If we go to trial, my lawyer says he'll use them, but I'd rather not humiliate the kid."

My mind raced with the calculations of when Sandra could have been with Nick. If she had gotten pregnant in November, she would have been about five weeks along by Christmas. Plenty of time to have missed a period and had an accurate test. An abortion early in January would have been perfect timing.

"You want to know the real story behind the night she ran away and this mess hit the fan? Sandra had spent most of the weekend with the Kings, then came home and claimed she had a stomach flu, and also told her mother she had a heavy period. Florence even went out and bought her thicker pads. When I went into her room with some hot tea, I noticed her eyes were weird, dilated much wider than they should have been, like someone on drugs. I asked her if she had taken anything and she said she had taken some cold medication and something for cramps for 'that time of the month.' Then, when I set the cup on her night table, I saw a sheet of instructions on her desk from a clinic and reached for it. But she grabbed it from me, crumbled it in a ball, and told me to get the hell out of her room. Right after we went to sleep later that night, she ran away." He folded his arms across his chest. "Now do you see that she lied about me to cover up her abortion? It would have killed her mother to know what she had done."

Another prisoner wearing orange stopped by the doorway for a moment and scowled. "See how they look at me?" Mr. Grover said with twisted scowl. "They ask you what you're in for here, and you know what I tell them? I say I am a child molester, which is the lowest of the low. When I get to the state prison, my life will be hell, but at least it won't last longer than six months."

"Maybe it isn't a good idea for you to plead guilty," I said as I tried to plan my next words without betraying my bewilderment. I was fairly certain Sandra had been truthful with me, but this was a new wrinkle. "If Sandra has done what you indicate, she needs psychological help. If you take the guilt on yourself, she will learn that she can avoid her own problems by dumping them on someone else."

After a long pause, Mr. Grover spoke with some hesitation. "Do you think I am making a mistake?"

"If you are not guilty, then it would be wrong to plead that way for the child's sake because she has to face the consequences of her actions, whether that be getting pregnant or lying about the abuse."

"Maybe you're right," he said, his shoulders sagging with resignation. "I wanted to spare Florence and Sandra the stress of a trial. That's why I made the deal with Mr. Prescott, although so far they haven't kept their promises to me."

"What was your deal?" Lillian asked.

"I said I would turn myself in if Florence's charges were dropped and I was sent to a prison hospital. But she still is being supervised by the department and they haven't let me see a doctor yet."

A guard tapped the door. "The lunches are going out upstairs, Grover."

As Mr. Grover snapped into his military posture, he winced in pain.

"I'm only here because I love them both and always will even if I will never understand why Sandra did this to me." Ronald Grover followed the guard to the staircase.

Halfway down the jailhouse steps I stopped. Lillian had the frozen smile of a politician's wife on an interminable receiving line. "What do you think?"

"He sounded sincere," Lillian began, "like he really loves that family."

"Did he do it?"

"I am beginning to wonder," Lillian admitted. "Could Sandra have been pregnant?"

Standing in the sweltering sun, I gave her my calculations. "At least she had the opportunity. Maybe she felt guilty about her decision to not have Nick's baby, so when Uncle Ronnie confronted her, she flipped out, and ran to the Kings." I paused to consider this revised version. "But why would she need to accuse him of sexual abuse?"

"She might have been looking for an excuse to stay with the Kings, who were less restrictive than her mother."

I strained to come up with a logical scenario. "Okay, when Uncle Ronnie heard what was going on," I continued, "he left town. When he was diagnosed with cancer, he figured he might as well do the time with the state footing his medical bill." I looked to Lillian for her response.

"I should have asked whether he had health insurance," Lillian muttered. "That guy's a real piece of work. Do you know how many molesters and rapists use the impotency excuse? The minute they're caught their privates shrivel up."

I combed damp tendrils of hair back with my fingers. "Let's go over what he said again. Impotence would not have affected his diddling her with his fingers or mouth, so he could have done that anyway. And, if she wanted to hang the guy, wouldn't she have accused him of having intercourse with her recently?"

"But this way there were no semen samples, at least none that would match his."

"Now you sound like you believe him."

"That man messed with our minds," Lillian drawled. "As I listened, I watched for a pattern of behavior. Whenever you would come on strong, he turned the tables on you, put you on the defensive. 'You should have known that' or 'why didn't you check that out?' Even the bit about the abortion was very calculated to put us off-balance, both in how he said it and the timing of when he dropped the bombshell."

"It could be true..."

"Yes, but you'll clear that up right away."

"How?"

"Just ask Sandra. Tell her you can access her medical records, which you can, and she'll confess."

"What if she was pregnant?"

"Even if she was, it has nothing to do with this case, unless—"

"—Uncle Ronnie is the one who is responsible!" I tried to absorb the impact of my guess. "No wonder the Kings would have become involved. First they would have helped get her through the abortion, then they would have reported the abuse."

As we walked to the parking lot, I touched Lillian's arm. "Have you ever read *Lolita*?"

"Yes, but I don't remember it very well."

"It's a story about a pedophile, from his point of view. I've been rereading it and there are some eerie similarities: an older man moves in with a woman so he can be close to her prepubescent daughter with whom he has become obsessed."

"Like Grover and Sandra?"

"Exactly. What's weird is that the man in the book is caught, goes to jail and dies before the trial is about to start."

"And Mr. Grover expects to die in jail," Lillian filled in.

"It's like he's playing out someone else's script." I felt dizzy in the sun and leaned against Lillian's car. "I shouldn't have tried to talk him out of that guilty plea."

Lillian fanned me with her pocketbook. "I disagree. You played that perfectly. He was clamming up and that won him over to your side. He likes you a lot."

"Likes me?"

"I could tell the way he looked at you. He was trying to impress you, and you played him like a fisherman with a prize catch."

"Is that a compliment?" I asked.

“Sure was, hon,” Lillian said as she slipped into the seat of her convertible and turned the key.

Driving to my office, I rearranged puzzle pieces in my mind trying to find two that fit. The curves were so similar I thought I might find a match, but there was a wrong angle to every version. Who was lying? Who was telling the truth? Was it ever possible to know for sure? On my car phone I called for messages. Sandra's mother wanted to see me. With a slight detour I would pass right by her new house. There was no car in the driveway, but she was not supposed to be up and about yet. I knocked on the door.

I heard a faint voice calling, so I opened the door a crack and announced who I was. Florence Shepherd told me to come in. I found her lying on the couch propped by pillows. “I wanted your opinion on a matter.” I nodded for her to continue. “Next weekend the various service corps at Sawgrass High are having a military ball. Nick is coming from Virginia. Sandra wants to stay at his house overnight. I said it wouldn't look right, but I want to know what you think.”

“If the kids want to get together, they can do it at one in the afternoon just as easily as one in the morning,” I said with a shrug. “What plan for the evening might you approve of?”

“She should dress here. I could take pictures of them, then they could go out to dinner and to the ball. Afterward they could go out with their friends for a while, but be home by midnight. Doesn't that sound safe?”

I was thinking that if Sandra's accusations were true, she was better protected at the King's house than with her mother in the next room, but all I said was “Considering that she is the complainant in a sexual abuse case, I think that would be wise.”

“Would you tell her that for me?” Florence gave me a petulant look. “I've tried several times to talk to her, but she refuses to confide in me.”

I was about to point out that Sandra had tried to tell her mother about the sexual abuse, when Sandra arrived home carrying several sacks of groceries. She came over and kissed her mother, and smiled at me.

“Show Gay your dress for the military ball,” Florence suggested.

Sandra brought out the white sleeveless gown made of moiré silk with floral straps that matched the trim on the flounce. She had white satin shoes and a hairpiece.

“Wow!” I said, impressed with the lavishness of the outfit. I offered to help carry in the rest of the groceries. Once outside, I spoke quickly and told Sandra that my opinion had been asked about the military ball evening plans. I suggested that she not hassle her mother about sleeping at the Kings' trailer until the legal case was over. Sandra nodded that she understood.

“I have something difficult to ask you.” I lowered my voice. “I saw Mr. Grover in jail today and he made some worrisome claims.”

Sandra's jaw dropped open. “What did he say this time?” she asked. I told her the abortion allegations. “Not true! Not a word of it.” Her face flushed. “I've *never* been pregnant. I did have a heavy period in January, which grossed him out, so he left me alone for a few nights. Otherwise—” She trembled with anger. “Otherwise he would have been all over me.” She slumped against the car. “I don't believe in abortion and I never would get rid of Nick's baby!”

“I trust you, Sandra, but I had to ask. I didn't want to look foolish if it came up in court or during a deposition.”

“I thought he was going to plead guilty and get this over with. If he does, it will be the first good thing he ever did for me.”

“He could change his mind, especially if he has a story that could explain why you would accuse him.”

“I should have kept my mouth shut. It isn't worth it.” Sandra covered her face with her hands and groaned, “It's never going to be over. Never.”

Ronald Grover was set for arraignment the following week. This is the hearing attended by the prosecutor, the defendant, and the defense attorney in which the defendant hears the formal charges against him for the first time and enters a plea to these charges. I had another commitment, but as soon as court was over I called the secretary in the state attorney's office and asked what had transpired.

“He pled not guilty.”

Disappointed, I called Lillian. “I hope I didn't influence him to do that.”

“No defense attorney permits a guilty plea at the arraignment,” she said. “He can change his plea or file a motion at the pre-trial conference.”

“What do I do now?”

“Let the prosecutor know you want to be informed in case he tries to get the bail reduced, because if he can raise it, Sandra's safety should be considered.”

A few days later I received a copy of the motion for reduction of bail, just as Lillian had predicted. The reasons stated were that the original bail was \$10,000 but it had been doubled to \$20,000, and also that the defendant had no prior arrests, that he was 62 years old, and had numerous chronic medical problems requiring constant medical supervision, including diabetes, diverticulitis, and arteriosclerosis. Also that the defendant had been an undergraduate at Notre Dame with a master's degree from Yale.

Yale! Mr. Grover had seemed slick, but his profession, lifestyle, even his speech seemed a bit too crude for Yale. Then again maybe I had everything wrong. Education and economic status had no bearing on his urge to molest Sandra. After all, remember Humbert Humbert, the tutor, the charmer, the seducer, the pervert, the obsessed, the debaucher, the raconteur, the poseur, the braggart, the storyteller. This is not a fictional flight of fancy, I reminded myself. These are real people with real lives with one in jail and the other condemning him either justly or unjustly. Once again edges of facts and different versions blurred. It was so easy to split them into the evil man and good little girl. But what if Uncle Ronnie had been telling the truth all along? What if Sandra was the liar?

Picking up the phone, I asked information in New Haven, Connecticut for the Yale Alumni Association. “We have several Grovers. What year did he graduate?”

“I'm not sure. Probably in the early 1950s, perhaps later because he was in the navy.”

“There's one Ronald Grover with a California address, but he was an undergraduate in the 1970s.”

“That's not it. Would you have the name if he did not receive a degree?”

“We have a file on every person who attended the university for six weeks or longer.”

“So there is no other Ronald Grover?”

“No, I'm sorry, but this happens all the time.”

I had invited Sandra for lunch the following Saturday. As soon as I saw her in the parking lot, I could tell she was distressed. “He's pleading not guilty,” she seethed. “That means there will be a trial, right?” We walked into the restaurant and didn't speak until we were seated at our table.

“I have proof he's not telling the truth, at least about some things.” I explained about Yale.

Sandra leaned forward. “You called to check?”

“Absolutely. And I am going to confirm everything I can—on him as well as you.”

“You don't believe me?”

“I'm not God. I wasn't there.” I sighed. “But I'm your guardian not his.”

“I'm going to have to testify in public, aren't I?”

“It looks that way.”

“How long will it take?”

“Based on my last case, I'd say at least six to nine months, unless he changes his plea again.”

“Is he getting out in the meantime?”

“That hasn't been decided, but my name is on the jail notification list so we'll have advance warning before he is released.”

“I hope this court business won't take me out of school too often. If I do okay on my math mid-term, I should be back on the honor roll.”

“I'm impressed. There is one deposition set for a week from Friday. I asked them to schedule it after school so you wouldn't miss classes.”

“Next Friday!” Tears filled her eyes.

“I know you don't want to have to tell your story again—”

“That's not it! It's the day of the district tennis tournament. Can the date be changed?”

“I don't know...” I calculated how many people would have to agree: the prosecutor, the defense attorney, and the court reporter. “I'll ask, but if they won't switch it, I'm afraid you will have to appear.”

“Will you be there?” she asked in a high-pitched voice.

“Of course. I'll be with you every step of the way.”

I called Lillian right away. "Lillian, you can work miracles, can't you?"

"Wait, let me check me wings. What's up?"

"On a scale from likely to impossible how difficult is it to change the date of a deposition?"

"Closer to impossible, why?"

I explained about Sandra's tennis tournament. "It's for the district championship and she's the second ranked player on the team. Without her, they won't have a chance."

"These guys aren't sympathetic to much, but a sports championship is something they understand!"

An hour later she called me back. "Done. We've pushed the deposition back three weeks until after spring break."

I called Sandra at once. She was at tennis practice. Florence was elated. "This will make Sandra's day! I'll tell her the minute she comes home."

That evening Sandra phoned me. "Do you mean it? I can go to the tournament?" I assured her that was so. "I am so glad you are my guardian," she said. "Thanks for everything!"

The lilt in her voice echoed in my mind for a long time afterward. There was so much I couldn't change, so little I could accomplish. Everyone asked me how I could tolerate the creeps and maniacs who hurt kids or how I could handle the pain of abused children. They wondered if I wasn't eternally frustrated by the system and why I would subject myself to so many impossible or disappointing outcomes. My response was to say that very often I could make a phone call and fix something, if only for an hour or a day. And if I didn't make that call, nobody else would. Here was the perfect example. It had been a very small issue. One child did not want the court's calendar to prevent her from playing a tennis game. A petty matter, surely not something that anyone else would care about. But Sandra cared. Her team cared. It was in her best interests to attend the game. You don't have to change the world to make a difference. Sometimes all you have to do is make one phone call.

The next morning I heard from the therapist working with Sandra and her mother. I had left a message saying I wanted an update on their progress in counseling. The court order allows therapists and doctors to share confidential information about the child and her caregivers with the guardian.

"I'm afraid we haven't accomplished as much as I would like," the therapist said. "They keep canceling appointments. Sandra doesn't find it easy to open up to me and mother is very resistant, especially to the question as to whether Sandra was molested. I've seen this happen before. When a trial is going on, people refuse to see the truth because there is always the possibility that what they want to believe will be the jury's verdict."

"Has Mrs. Shepherd said anything about Mr. Grover's not-guilty plea?"

"Yes. I saw them both a few days after that happened. Florence was reassured that Mr. Grover was going to get a fair trial, but Sandra saw it as one more betrayal. Until his guilt is resolved in court, I don't feel either of them will benefit much from therapy."

"Do you believe Sandra was abused?"

"Yes, I do, even though she doesn't want to talk about it and thinks she can put it behind her. In fact, what may happen is she never deals with it until much later, sometime in middle age when it catches up with her and precipitates a crisis. Right now, though, there isn't much we can do until Florence accepts that Mr. Grover did the molestation, and tells her daughter she believes her. Until that happens, there will be an enormous rift in trust between mother and daughter."

A status conference was scheduled for the following week. I asked whether or not I should attend, but was told it was procedural. If Mr. Grover's bail was lowered or he was released, I would be informed. Just to be certain, I left a message with the prosecutor about the Yale lie. That afternoon I phoned the assistant state attorney to find out what happened. The secretary, who usually informed me of events, was evasive. "Let me put you through to Mr. Yost."

While I was holding, my anxiety mounted. They probably lowered the bail and Uncle Ronnie had been released. I doubted he would stay away from Florence, which would mean that Sandra would have to live somewhere else. Once again the victim would suffer and the perpetrator would be free, at least for a while.

"Good news," Will Yost said in a fast, clipped voice. "Ronald Grover pled *nolo contendere*, was adjudicated guilty, and was sentenced to seven years under the Department of Corrections, with three years probation, plus we got a restitution hearing, and of course no further contact with the victim."

"You mean he's going to be locked up for seven years?"

"He'll get out in three or four, but yes, he'll be transferred tomorrow to the state prison."

"So it is over. No depositions, no trial..." I rambled as I digested the news.

"That's right."

"Why did he change his plea?"

"He says he went along with the public defender the last time because he had been pressured into it. He claims that he only has six months to live anyway, and Sandra and her mother have their whole lives before them. You should have heard the guy. He sounded like that character in *A Tale of Two Cities*."

"You mean Sidney Carton? 'It is a far better thing that I do than I have ever done before.'"

"Exactly. He played it like a noble gesture to spare his loved ones, even though he was innocent."

"Do you think he is?"

"Hell no. Most of the guilty ones plead innocent and it is the ones who feel the noose around their necks who plead out to cut their losses."

"Did you call Sandra?"

"No, I thought you might want to do that."

"I will. And thank you, Mr. Yost, for Sandra's sake, thank you very much."

I checked my watch. Unless she had tennis practice, Sandra would just be coming home from school. I dialed the phone. "Sandra?" I said when I recognized her voice. "It's over. Mr. Grover is going to prison for seven years." I explained what the plea meant.

"That means everyone will believe me."

"Yes, Sandra. People who aren't guilty don't volunteer to go to jail."

"I can't wait to tell Nick."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Are you still my guardian?"

"Yes. You still are under the protection of the department, but the criminal part is finished, although we might be able to get you some money from Mr. Grover for therapy and college. It's called restitution."

"He doesn't have any, or at least that is what Mother says."

"We'll see."

"Hey, there are a few other people who need to be told. Could you call my caseworker and that counselor?"

"Sure. That's what I am here for," I said with a satisfied chuckle, "to make phone calls for you."

Curious to discover whether I could get some restitution for Sandra, I consulted with Deputy Moline who told me there was an on-going fraud investigation centering around Grover's business dealings. He gave me the number of the investigator on the case and I phoned him. He told me that someone, who had been deceived in a business deal with Mr. Grover, had already hired a private detective to locate some of his assets. All the accounts had been closed and nothing could be found.

"What do you think happened to the money?"

"He probably transferred everything to someone else's name."

That afternoon I phoned Sandra, who was not home. Florence was bubbling with the news that the day before Sandra's tennis team had won the regional championship and that Sandra had been an essential member of the winning team, coming in second over all.

Even though I was wary of Florence, I decided to discuss restitution with her. "If we can locate some of Mr. Grover's assets, what might you think would be a fair settlement on Sandra's behalf?"

"I can take care of my daughter myself," she snapped.

Exercising considerable restraint, I kept to myself any facetious remarks about supporting Sandra by pandering her to Uncle Ronnie. "Will you be able to return to work soon?" I asked.

"The doctor says it will be at least six months."

"Before the department closes the case they are going to want proof that you are able to support the family."

"My sister is helping out," Florence replied with much irritation. "Is there anything wrong with that?"

The indignation in her voice seemed forced, but I dropped the subject. I asked her to have Sandra call me so I could congratulate her about the tournament.

Thinking about it, I decided that Mr. Grover was not a stupid man. When he left the state, he had gotten his financial affairs in order. He had felt a responsibility to Florence and Sandra, but he could not give them money directly. Then I thought about Constance. She had been on hand from almost the beginning. Every time I had seen her she had been more denigrating about Sandra's behavior than Uncle Ronnie's. In fact, she had told me what a gentleman he was, how well-educated, how he had treated her sister and niece with kindness. And Mr. Grover had spoken of Constance as a fine lady, someone he trusted to do her best for Florence and Sandra. Constance had always taken care of her little sister and would continue to do so. I theorized that Mr. Grover had transferred his assets to Constance and that she was using them to support her sister's family. If it were true that Ronald Grover was going to die in jail, than Constance could then give her sister whatever remained. If by some chance he recovered before he was released, Constance might have agreed to return the balance to him at that time. In any case, attempting to force him to provide restitution was futile. The money was long gone or hidden, or—more likely—providing restitution in an unofficial manner.

When I next talked with the therapist, she indicated that her sole accomplishment had been helping Florence set some realistic rules for Sandra. “It's unfair for Florence to expect her daughter to be on call for her twenty-four hours a day and then give her curfews too. She can't have it both ways. Either Florence takes the reigns as the adult in the family or she has to permit Sandra to make her own decisions.”

“How's Sandra doing?”

“She claims that now that Mr. Grover is out of the picture, it won't affect her anymore. Right now it is easier to deny the problem than to deal with it.”

“At least the outcome of the case has left Sandra feeling that most everyone believes her—even if her mother won't admit it.”

“I think Florence realizes that something sexual did happen, otherwise Mr. Grover would not have pled no contest and accepted a jail term. We also discussed how a good defense lawyer could have kept him out of jail for six months while awaiting trial and during that time he could have received better medical treatment, have been more comfortable, and—if he were dying—avoided prison entirely.”

“Has she told that to her daughter?”

“No. Florence is in the second stage of denial. While she may be beginning to believe he was to blame, she is trying to say it did not affect them and they can go on with their lives.”

“What about Sandra?”

“It may be several years before she comes to grips with what she has lost.”

“What do you suggest I do?”

“Be available.”

I kept in touch with Sandra by phone and by sometimes dropping by the fast food restaurant where she worked to say hello. A week after school was out for the summer, I invited her to lunch. “I have some news!” she said when we met. “When Nick was here for the prom, he gave me a ring. We're going to be married this time next year.”

“What about your college plans?”

“I might go to junior college for two years, then join the military and finish up my education in one of their programs.”

“You're a terrific kid, you know that? You pulled up your grades after a difficult time, you helped make your tennis team champions, you saw your mom through her surgery, you've held a job, and helped pay for your car expenses. I know you will continue to make the right choices when the time comes.”

Six months later I had a curious call from a Mr. Hernandez of the prison probation department. “Do you know anything about Mr. Grover's plans to live in Daytona Beach with Florence Shepherd when he gets out of jail?”

“No,” I replied, somewhat surprised that he was still alive. “How is his health? He was very ill when he was sentenced.”

“Nothing in my reports indicate a particular medical problem other than a mild heart condition and high blood pressure.”

“Nothing terminal?”

“Not that I can tell.”

“Part of his sentence is that even when he is released he is not able to have contact with the victim, which would be a problem if he lived with Sandra's mother. How soon could he get out?” I asked.

“Can't say. I'm just doing the paperwork.”

Once again I had the sense that Florence Shepherd and Ronald Grover's relationship had never been severed. Whenever he was released, he would marry Florence and thus retrieve his money. Their loop would be closed, but it would exclude Sandra. No wonder Sandra had forged her own connections with Nick and his family. Her mother had betrayed her once by bartering her for security and could do it again.

Shortly after that, the court terminated the social services department's supervision of the case and I was no longer Sandra's Guardian ad Litem.

“Don't think a piece of paper will stop me from caring about you,” I said when I visited her at work. “I'll still be around if you need me.”

On Sandra's 18th birthday I telephoned her. Florence Shepherd said that her daughter had moved out that afternoon. “She couldn't wait another minute.”

“Where is she?”

“With the Kings. They got what they wanted after all. They've even set a wedding date for June.” Florence was crying. “You can call her there if you want. They've got a phone now.”

Sandra was out at a birthday celebration. When I reached her the next day, she was filled with plans for her wedding and asked for my address to send me an invitation.

I wore a silk dress to Sandra's wedding, which was the weekend after her high school graduation. Balloons and streamers decorated the yard surrounding the Kings' mobile home. A wooden arbor was decked with flowers. I had picked a bouquet of roses from my parents' garden and had arranged them in a cut-glass bowl as part of their present. I set this in the center of the gift table, and it was soon surrounded by mounds of gifts. Coolers of ice were filled with sodas and beer. While waiting for the proceedings to begin, everyone took something to drink. Most of the guests were high school friends. Nick strolled around in full military dress, his face getting redder by the minute in the blazing sun as the hour set for the wedding passed. At last a car pulled up. Florence and her sister, Constance, arrived. It was clear that they were guests, rather than the hosts for this affair. A friend of the family sang a song and everyone, drinks in hand, encircled the arbor. The maids of honor came forward in their off-the-shoulder purple dresses. The four groomsmen wore tuxedo shirts and trousers, purple cummerbunds and bow ties, but in deference to the torpid day, did not put on their jackets.

Two small children were pushed ahead by their mothers. One carried a basket of dried flowers, another a satin pillow with a ring. Sandra descended from the trailer wearing an elaborate confection of tulle and lace with a train that filled in the distance from the porch to the altar. Her hair was pulled back except for Venus-rising-from-the-sea tendrils framing her face. Florence was at her side, giving her daughter away. A preacher performed the blessedly short ceremony.

When I passed through the receiving line, Florence was cordial, Constance pretended not to remember me. While the food was being laid out on tables in the trailer, the wedding party, and even some of the guests disappeared to change out of their long sleeves and satin duds and reemerged in cut-off jeans and T-shirts. One bridesmaid put on a bathing suit, another skin-tight shorts and a halter.

When the guests were eating, Millie King took me aside to help her cut the cake. I held the plates while she worked on the top layer. “Do you think we did right by her?” she asked. Her hands were trembling. “We did the best we could. Sandra wanted a real wedding, and we pulled it off, didn't we?” I nodded. “You know, me and Nick's father had three kids before we got hitched.” She laughed so hard a seam in her dress started to rip. “But we was older and had been through hell together already.”

“Sandra and Nick have been through more than most kids their age.”

“I know, I know.” Her expression clouded. “I just want...” A tear slipped out. “I just want them to have it easier than we did.”

Sandra came out of the bedroom in a butter-colored suit and matching bow in her hair. She waved for me to come back into her room and we sat on her bed. “You don't think I should have gotten married, do you?”

“You need to get away from here,” I stated.

Sandra gave me a hug. “Sometimes its like a war between Millie and my mother. Now they will have to give me some peace.” She seemed to be waiting for my approval. “I'll continue in school, you'll see.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I haven't told Mom yet, but I'm enlisting next month. I'm going to need a career of my own, no matter what, and that's the best way to get my education too.”

“Part of the plan,” I said.

Sandra twisted her brand new wedding band. “Yes, and so far it's working out the way I wanted.”



Update: All names and details that would breach my oath of confidentiality have been changed, but the facts of the case and my involvement are true. “Sandra” joined “Nick” in military service. He spent more than a year helping with troop deployment to Bosnia. Sandra had his daughter two years later and was trained in search and rescue. Ronald Grover served less than three years in a state prison, where his health—unlike that of Humbert Humbert—dramatically improved. I was notified of his release by the Department of Corrections, as was Sandra. He moved back in with Florence, and the last I heard, still resides in our community. Sandra is in contact with her mother, but refuses to visit the home where Ronald lives or allow him to see her daughter. For a while Sandra and I saw each other whenever she returned to town, but I have not heard from her now in several years.