



PROLOGUE

He sat slumped on a bench in the doldrums of self-pity. His usually smiling

face was devoid of pleasure as he eyed the statue that was the central point of the square, noting the crack in its stone pediment and the flaking that began at the figure's feet.

“I'm as dilapidated as the monument,” he said to the stranger sitting on the other end of the bench.

The stranger nervously looked up. She did not respond, but moved farther down the bench. Bert Channing was nearly sixty and showed it by the gray in his hair and the worry lines across his broad brow. He was a distinguished man; his strong chin and high cheek bones were still sharp and clear.

He got up from the bench, walked with slow, shuffling steps and closed his trench coat against the brisk wind. He looked

skyward. Dark clouds, like a flock of ravens, flew swiftly before the wind. When he heard the sound of the trolley car on Powell he sighed as though it would be the last time he would hear the high-pitched bell.

He thought of his dear wife, Madaline, her auburn hair streaked with gray and pulled back, caught with an elastic band, working as usual in her bright, airy kitchen. Then of his son, Del, a professor of global history seated at Umass in Amherst. His son's blond hair and large grin were inherited from him, but the sparkling, hazel eyes were his mother's. He could picture him studying, hunching his large shoulders, encased in an old brown sweater with a shawl collar. Bert then thought of his daughter Carrie Louise, with her recent

bleached blonde hairdo, her trendy clothes and odd friends. Her eyes no longer held a warmth for her family and her soft lips snarled when they weren't pouting.

Madaline can make it when we start all over and Del doesn't need financial help, but, Carrie Louise will hate having no inheritance, he thought.

Bert hunched his broad shoulders, breathed deeply, steeling himself for the task ahead and headed for his office. He brushed by a stocky, nondescript, dark haired man on the corner, who turned away from him, adjusting his newspaper in front of his face. Bert didn't notice him, or the fact that he withdrew a cell phone from his overcoat pocket and placed a call.

The day was gray and dreary. A cold rain began to drizzle like a leaky faucet from

the dark cloud-laden skies. Most of the inhabitants of the city scurried along the sidewalk without much interest in who or what surrounded them.

Had someone spoken to Bert, he would not have heard, he was that consumed by his problems. Where yesterday he had strode with purpose, shoulders back, a broad smile on his face, today his steps were a shuffle, shoulders sagging, eyes dazed, face devoid of his normal good humor. His fine gray pinstripe suit under his trench coat appeared to hang from his frame.

Bert returned to his office with dragging steps. His world, as he knew it, had all but collapsed. Now he would have to tell his employees their jobs were in jeopardy and their lives were about to become as chaotic

as his own.

In front of the elevator to his sixteenth floor office he hesitated. He knew that he should fight back, but he also knew that he wouldn't. How do I tell the world that...he couldn't even complete the thought.

Bert checked his watch as the elevator passed the tenth floor. It read five twenty-five. His sigh of relief was audible. The staff left promptly at five so he wouldn't have to tell them until tomorrow.

The elevator indicator showed sixteen, the bell announced his floor. The door opened. Bert stepped out into the hall and walked with tentative steps to the door of his office suite. He inserted his key in the lock as the telephone began to ring. He inhaled the pleasant odor of the rubrum lilies in a crystal vase by the door and walked over

the thick emerald carpet onto the oriental rug in front of the rosewood reception desk where he picked up the receiver.

“Hello,” he said, and his dilapidated world was ended with an explosion and a billow of orange flames.