

Resurrection Angel

Reviews for *Resurrection Angel*:

Nominated by the Private Eye Writers of America for the Shamus Award for Best First Novel of the Year.

“Denton Ward’s profound and poignant personality reaches out from the pages to grab the reader by the throat. Monty Crocetti, strutting and sassing, redefines the nature of both sidekick and wise-woman. Only two such bold and compelling characters could hold their own against Mize’s plot and vigorous prose.

The bar has been raised! William Mize has the rare, raw talent that is found in a mere handful of novelists.”

Deborah Adams, creator of the Jesus Creek mystery series

“Its flawed characters flow through the action and the book wraps up with grace and pathos. Some of the writing is exquisite and chapter twenty-four may be the best example of the author’s skills.

The woo-woo elements are integrated into the narrative in believable fashion and should appeal to those who have enjoyed Martha Lawrence’s Elizabeth Chase. Recommended.”

Gary Warren Niebur, Private Eye Entertainment

“William Mize takes the reader for a melancholy spill ride, in this psychomystery. He keeps the pace going with dialogue to fill in the sinister spaces that he manages to weave into every page. We know the murderer will strike, but when? It is a race between Denton Ward’s sanity; Monty Crocetti’s patience, strength, and love for Denton and Lisa, and Lisa’s tormentors. Ten thumbs up for Mize’s touching and fascinating story.”

Shelley Glodowsky, Reviewer, Midwest Book Review

Resurrection Angel
A Denton Ward and Monty Crocetti Mystery
By
William Mize

Resurrection Angel
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This book is for my father,
William Kellett Mize
This is what I have learned.

*Behold, I send an Angel before thee,
To keep thee in the way,
And to bring thee into the place
Which I have prepared.*

Exodus 23:20

*Angels are bright still,
Though the brightest fell.*

Macbeth IV:iii

One

The man's thin, almost feminine fingers turned the page of the comic book then returned to the burgundy leather armrest. A single finger tapped, tapped, tapped a slow, adagio beat in time with the Beethoven piano sonata that flowed from the corners of the darkened room.

Denton Ward smoothed the page, ran his hand across the full color, twenty-eight page, pen and ink battle for justice before him. *Daredevil, The Man Without Fear*. He began to read, but was interrupted by the shrill ring of the telephone.

He growled under his breath and tried to focus. He took a deep breath and brushed the page with the back of his hand.

Ring.

This time he glared at the offending phone and slouched lower into the plush chair. The ancient leather groaned and the brass claw foot coasters squeaked as he rolled farther away from the circle of light thrown by his desk lamp.

Ring.

"Monty!" he hollered. "Telephone!" He looked skyward, toward the second floor of the converted firehouse they shared, toward the other candlelight that illuminated the top of the stairs. He saw no shadows, heard no footsteps on the hardwood floor that might signal her making her way toward the upstairs extension.

Ring.

"Monty!"

Nothing.

“Dammit.” He threw the comic down, then snatched the cordless out of its cradle.

“What the hell is wrong with you people?” he said. “Can’t you answer a phone?”

“What – I –” A girl’s voice, a teenage whisper.

“You heard me.” He sat up straight in the chair. “Here’s a bit of advice before your ass gets bounced to the unemployment line. Answering services answer phones. Good-bye.” He slammed down the phone. “There.” He tugged on his tie, cleared his throat and settled back into the chair.

Ring.

“Unbelievable.” He picked up the phone again. “What did I just get through telling you?”

“They – they said it would be okay - ”

“Said it would be okay if what? If you bugged the hell out of me?” Denton said. “No – it’s not okay.”

“The ladies,” she said. “The ladies who put me through to you. They said it would be okay if I talked to you for a minute, just a minute - ”

“They would never – is this some kind of joke?”

“No – I swear – it’s not – I just need - ” Her voice verged on tears. Denton could hear the quiver, could sense the dam about to break. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Jeeze.” Denton exhaled a bushel of air and sat down. “I’m sorry, too – uh - ”

“Lisa.”

“Lisa,” he said. “Okay Lisa – I don’t know how you got past my answering service, but it’s nine o’clock at night by my watch.” He tugged on his starched white cuff and stared at his watch for the full effect.

“I know,” she said, “but it will just take a minute, just a second –

“My girlfriend will be coming down those stairs any minute now, expecting me to take her out to an expensive, snooty restaurant. When she hits the floor, I hang up.”

“I know once you hear it - ”

“A piece of advice,” he said. “Every one’s got a story. Just look at that damn Jerry Springer show. Every half-breed and his sister’s on there - ”

He was out of his chair, the click of his Bass penny loafers on the hardwood floor kept time with his tirade, his voice growing as loud as his indignation.

“Ssshhh - ”

“What?”

“They’ll hear you.”

“Who?” he said. “Who’ll hear me? Your parents?”

“I’m not supposed to be out of my room - ”

“Why? Are you grounded?”

“No,” she whispered. “We’re not supposed to be out after lights out or Reggie or one of the nurses comes and - ”

“Nurses?” Denton shook his head. “Just where are you calling from?”

“The hospital.”

“The hospital?”, he said. “Which hospital?”

“I don’t know,” she cried. “Some hospital. Some loony bin.” She spit out the last words. Short and abrupt, it was the sound of a drumstick smacked against a taut snare head.

“What?”

“You heard me,” she said. “I’m in a mental hospital.”

Denton stopped walking. The sonata was loud in his ears and his racing heart, his pulse, thick in his neck, in his temples, kept counterpoint time. He licked his dry lips before he spoke.

“A mental hospital.”

“Yeah.”

“How dare you?” he said. “How *dare* you call here. Is this some kind of joke?”

“No – no – I swear, Mister Ward, it isn’t - ”

“I don’t know who you are, or who put you up to this, but that was a long time ago – years ago – and I don’t need anyone calling up in the middle of the night just to get their jollies - “

“It’s not like that,” she said. “I swear - ”

“You people just need to leave me the hell alone - ” He hit the *Power* button and slammed the phone down on his desk. The Beethoven sonata had become a Chopin nocturne. The slow, languid notes crept across the floor and Denton Ward, shoulder slumped, head down, slowly walked back to his desk. He picked up *Daredevil, The Man Without Fear*. He smiled at the irony.

Ring.

He looked at the phone, a thousand different thoughts, a thousand different memories racing through his mind in that second.

Ring.

He picked it up. *Power.*

“What?” he whispered into the receiver.

“Please - ” she said. “Please don’t hang up on me.”

“I - ”

“I’m scared, Mr. Ward. I’m scared and I don’t know who I am.”

“What?”

“I don’t know – I don’t remember who I am.”

“Jesus.” Denton sat down. He put the comic book aside, tossed it atop the stack that occupied the majority of his desk, a pillar of heroes and villains waiting to be read.

"I hate it here."

"I know," he said. "I know you do." He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and his world went black. There was silence on the other end of the line. The palm leaves that were blown against the large picture window were like fingernails across a blackboard, like weathered knuckles tap, tap, tapping against a closed oaken door.

Arms reaching out, holding him down, arms tying him tight.

"I'm scared," she said. "Really scared."

"I know. I know you are, but you're going to be okay."

"They all say that – Dr. Robbins, my dad, everybody - "

"They're just trying to do what's best - "

"It's not - " She sniffed a few times. "It hurts."

"I know it does, but - "

"Will you help me?"

"Help you?"

"Yeah," she said, "the article said that you - "

"Article?"

"Yeah. The one in *People* magazine said - "

"I know, I know what it said, but I can't - " He looked skyward, toward the top of the stairs.

"Just a minute," she said. "Just a second and - "

"I can't."

"I hate it here. It's too white and too clean and the people – the people stare at me like I'm crazy or something."

Denton swiveled his chair away from the light.

"They'll do that," he said. "They'll do that like you don't have any feelings. Like you can't be hurt." He heard the low whistle of the warm Florida wind through the palm trees, heard the gentle *tap, tap, tap* on the window.

"But it does."

"They act like you're deaf, like you can't hear what they're saying, whispering, gossiping about."

"But I can."

"You can block out the televisions, block out the intercom – hell, you can even block out the people screaming, but you can't block out their eyes. Their eyes."

"It hurts."

"Yes it does." Denton leaned back in the chair and listened to the music. The gentle piano notes waltzed across the hardwood floor, evoked images of men in lace and finery, of women in bodices and powder. Specters from the past that danced in the present.

"I don't belong here."

"No one deserves that."

"Then why? Why'd he put me here? Doesn't he love me?"

Denton heard the rustle of tissue in the receiver as she wiped her nose.

“They think it’s good for you.”

“Yeah, right.”

“But it’s just convenient.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But they don’t know.” He stared into the darkness and watched the spirits dance. “They don’t know what goes on in there after the lights go out. After they go home. They think that just because they leave you on a doorstep with a suitcase in your hand and a note pinned to your shirt that you’re gonna get help.”

“But you don’t.”

“Sometimes you do,” he said. “Sometimes you don’t.” He opened his desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of pills, a shaman’s rattle, the prescription and the dosage a magic incantation to be whispered by a believer. He opened the bottle, shook out two and swallowed them dry. He closed the bottle and put it down on his desk. His hand passed under the light and he paused, paused to look at his thin, tapered fingers, at the lines that crossed his palm. He found his life line, then followed it down to his wrist, down to the jagged white scars that were kept hidden beneath his starched white cuffs.

“Sometimes it works,” he said. “Sometimes it doesn’t.”

“He said he loved me.”

“They all say that, don’t they?”

“Yeah.”

“They say it’s for your own good.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But where are they now?” he said. “Where are they when you need them? Where are all the social workers, the aunts, the uncles, the doctors? They’re gone, aren’t they?”

“Yeah.”

“But you – you’re still there. Still waiting, still watching, still dying for them to come back and take you away.”

“They’re never gonna come, are they?”

“No,” Denton said. “They didn’t. They didn’t come at all.”

The final note was struck on the piano. It faded away, then after a pop and a crack, the arm on the photograph rose and returned to its resting place.

Silence.

“Will you help me?”

“I can’t,” he said. “I can’t go back.”

“Please?”

“I can’t,” he pleaded. “I can’t go out. I can’t leave the house - ” He ran his fingers through his spiked blonde hair. “I can’t.”

"I'll – I'll die here – I'll die here without you."
"No you won't - "
"Just for a minute, just for a second, come up here and - "
"I've – we've made plans." Another look upstairs. "It's our anniversary tonight and I'm – she's - " He pointed to the distant light. He heard the sound of footsteps above him, like the rumble of distant thunder.
"He said you'd help me. He promised."
"Who?" Denton said. "Who said that?"
"Reggie."
"Reggie? Who's Reggie?"
"He's the guy – the guy who brought me the magazine article."
"I'm sorry he said that, but - "
"You help the police, don't you?"
"I used to," he said, "but not any more."
"You can do it," she said. "You can help me. Help me remember."
"I can't," he said. "She needs me. We've made plans – You're going to have to find someone else."
"There is no one else, Mr. Ward. No one has those powers like you do."
"I know, but - "
"They don't know. They don't understand."
"That's because they've never been there."
"And they won't listen to me when I talk."
"That's because they think you're crazy. Or sick."
"Do you, Mr. Ward?" she said. "Do you think I'm crazy?"
"No – no I don't."
"They're just gonna leave me here."
"I know."
"Alone."
"I know."
"I need you, Mr. Ward. I really need you."
"I know."
"I don't have anyone else."
"I know."
"Then you'll come?"

Tap, tap, tap on the window outside. Thump, thump, thump on the floor above. Denton closed his eyes and covered his free ear with his hand, but he could still hear the call, he could still see the ghosts. Tap, tap, tap on the window. Tap, tap, tap on the floor.

He opened his eyes. Daredevil was waiting for him. He yanked on his tie, then unbuttoned his collar. He turned to face the window and looked out into the warm Florida night. He saw the palm fronds, saw the skeletal hands that reached toward the stars that were dying a million miles away. He

saw his own reflection and that of the upstairs light and they both seemed fainter, weaker than before.

“I’ll be there in an hour.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

A click as she hung up, a second as he did the same. His trembling fingers pulled a cigarette out of his red and white Marlboro pack and put it between his lips. He threw the pack on his desk, then walked over to the stereo.

He pushed a button. The arm rose, inched its way over, then lowered itself into the well-worn groove. After a pop and a crack, the music started, the spirits returned and the dance began anew.

Two

“C'mon, you son of a bitch –”

Monty Crocetti tugged at the hem of her short black dress then yanked it over the matching garter belt that held up her lace trimmed stockings. After the battle was over, she ran her fingers across her stomach then down her thighs and made sure there were no wrinkles.

“Oh yeah.” She smiled at her image in the full length mirror. “He's gonna have a fuckin' heart attack.”

She flicked at a speck of imaginary lint then turned her attention to her feet, to her black Doc Marten boots. She wiggled her toes and the polished leather reflected the other candlelight that filled the room.

“Excellent,” she whispered.

She took a step forward, raised her arms and wrapped her hands around the polished brass pole. She took another step and she fell, she began her descent into the darkness below.

She landed with a *thud* on the hardwood floor, let go of the pole, smoothed her dress again. She cleared her throat and walked toward the only light in the darkened room, the lamp on Denton Ward's desk. She walked in time with the music that surrounded her. A piano nocturne, slow and deliberate. She walked until she was within the circle of light then did a graceful pirouette, arms held high like a Degas ballerina. The countless bracelets and bangles she wore on each wrist crashed and collided, provided a rough counterpoint to her dance.

“How do I look?” she said.

Denton did not look up, his eyes were focused on a point many years away.

“Hello?” She snapped her fingers. “Hello?”

Denton looked up with a start. “What?”

She did a quick turn. “How do I look?”

“Good.” His gaze returned to the dark place.

“That's it? It took me an hour to squeeze into this stupid thing - “

“I said that you - “

“Hell, I even went to one of those nail joints.” She examined her fingers. “Cost me thirty bucks, but I figured what the hell, it only comes around once a year and - “

“I can't go.”

Monty looked away from her nails. “What did you say?”

“We can't go out tonight.” His eyes darted from the stack of comics to the desk lamp to the shiny copper pennies in his black loafers.

Monty's eyes narrowed. She crossed her arms and the bracelets hit again, cast sparks of silver across the room.

“Why?”

“I - I just can't go to dinner tonight.”

“You son of a bitch.” She stomped her foot. “You didn't take your meds did you?”

“I - “

“Even after I *told* you to, you didn't take your meds.”

“I did,” he said. “I swear I did.”

“Then why the fuck aren't we heading out the door right now? What's with this 'I can't go' shit?”

“I got a call - “ He gestured to the telephone.

“A call? What kind of call?”

“I - she needs help.”

“What kind of help? You can barely get out of the fuckin' house sometimes - “

“I know,” he said. “I'm sorry - “

“You fuckin' hyperventilate when you get in your car - “

“I know - “

“And you're gonna go out in the middle of the fuckin' night and help someone *else*?”

“She was crying.”

“You're gonna be the one crying in a minute.” She balled up her fist. “What about me?”

“We can go to dinner some other time.”

“You *asshole*.” Monty turned on her heel, stomped over to her desk and threw herself into her chair. She slid down until her jet black flattop was almost even with the top of her desk. Her jaw was set and her gaze was steady as she stared at the dark computer screen in front of her.

"I'm sorry," Denton said.

"Every year - "

"I know."

"Usually I can't get you out of the fuckin' house, but *this* year - " She shook her head and smiled a grim, sad smile.

"I know, but - "

"Go ahead - " She waved toward the front door. "Do what you gotta do."

"Monty - I - "

"Go ahead. Go on, brother man. Jump on that horse and get the hell outta here. Go save the day."

"I don't want to leave with you all mad and - "

"Don't worry 'bout me. Shit. I'll be fine." She picked up a Mason jar full of sharpened Blackhawk pencils and shook it, the dry rattle the warning of a desert snake.

"Mon - please - "

"Are you still here?" She took two pencils from the jar and put them down on the faded green blotter. They formed the letter *L*.

"I just want to explain."

"I know all I need to know." She put down pencil number three and formed the letter *U*. "You can't take me out for our anniversary because of some damn phone call." Pencil number four formed a square.

"It's not our anniversary."

"Yes it is."

"We're not even married."

"Don't push *that* button, Den."

"Sorry - " He held up his hands. "Sorry."

Monty pulled open her desk drawer and threw debris from side to side until she found a roll of cellophane tape, some thumbtacks and a tangle of multi-colored rubber bands.

"It's just a date," he said. "Just some day on the calendar."

"It was our first," she said. "Our first dress up dinner date."

"But - "

"You even wore a tuxedo."

"See?" Denton said. "That's what I mean. It's not even a real anniversary, like a wedding anniversary."

"It's real to me, dammit," she said. "These things are important to me."

"Why?"

"Why?" She looked up at him. "I can't even fuckin' believe you said that."

"Well?"

"They - they give me something to hold on to."

"To hold on to?"

“When things get bad.”
“Get bad?” he said. “What are you worried about?”
“What if we lose everything?”
“I will never let that happen. You will never turn another trick and I'm not about to move into a cardboard box again.”
“It's not - “
“Those dates, those rituals, they got us through some hard times, but just look around you.” He stood up, raised his arms high. “Look at what we've done since we moved down here. Look at what we've got.”
“It's not about *this* - “ She mimicked his gesture. “It's about you and me.”
“What about us?”
“We're all alone here, Den. Everybody I got, everybody I know, they're all back in San Francisco.”
“I know you get lonely - “
“Then why won't you take me out?” Pencils were stacked on pencils, sharpened logs hewn for a house, held together with tape, with tacks, with rubber bands. Four walls built three pencils high.
“This girl needs me,” he said. “She's in trouble.”
“What kind of trouble?”
“She's in a hospital.”
“Big deal. Tons of people are in the hospital. What are you, a Shriner?”
“She's in Howard.”
“Oh.” She put the pencil down. “I see.”
“Exactly.”
“What's wrong with her?”
“She's got amnesia,” he said. “Can't remember anything.”
“So - “
“You think *you're* alone? She's forgotten everything. Her friends, her family, everything.”
“Oh my God.” As the last word escaped her lips, Monty covered her mouth, then quickly crossed herself. “Sorry.” She looked to the heavens, then back to Denton. “Not even her family?”
“No one.”
“That's bad.”
“She sounded pretty bad, so I thought I'd drive up there, see how she's doing, see if I could help.”
“You? Drive?” She snickered, then covered her mouth.
“What?”
“I'm sorry,” she laughed again. “It's just so funny.”
“I can drive.”
“Yes you can,” she said. “And you got a real nice car too, but - “
“I *took* my meds.” He pointed to the bottle. “You can count them if

you want.”

“No, no - “ She waved her hand. “I believe you.”

“I even took four.”

“Damn.”

“That's right.”

“You did that for me?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” She pursed her lips, looked at the pencils stacked on her desk. “And once you get there?”

“Like I said - just see how she's doing.”

“Den, Den, Den.” Monty shook her head and smiled. “I love you for it, but you gotta know that once you get up there they ain't gonna let you see that girl.”

“I - well - “

“It's almost ten o'clock at night - “

“She's up,” he said. “She just called me.”

“It's not about bedtime,” Monty said. “It's about nurses, guards, barred windows. They aren't gonna let you just waltz in there and - “

“*She* called *me*,” he said. “It's not like I wasn't invited.”

“Let's do this - “ She rose from her desk and walked over to his. “Let's just go to dinner, have a nice bottle of wine - “

“And what? Forget about her?”

“No,” she said. “I was gonna say that come Monday morning we call there, talk to the doctor, see what the story is - “

“I told her I'd be there tonight.”

“You also told me that you'd take me to dinner, so what's it gonna be?”

Denton exhaled, then opened his mouth to speak, then turned away, leaving Monty alone in the middle of the room. He went to the picture window. Dark furtive shapes swayed across the landscape. *Tap, tap, tap.*

“I can't let her go through what I went through.”

“She's not. Your case is different.”

“Is it?” He looked at her. “Is it really? We're both imprisoned.”

Monty walked over to the brass pole that ran from the floor to the ceiling of the old firehouse. She grabbed it with one hand, swung herself in a circle, then used the momentum to propel herself over to the bookshelves that lined three walls out of four. She adjusted several books, made sure they were in proper size order. She dusted the top of a picture frame with the tip of her forefinger, then came to Denton's plastic model of Lon Chaney as the Phantom of The Opera.

The small face and hands glowed in the dark, cast an eerie green light from the safety of the books that surrounded it. In one hand was the mask he used to protect others from his disfigured face. Over his white tie and black tails he wore a long black cape lined with crimson velvet. At his feet

were another pair of hands, another face. Injured hands wrapped around steel prison bars. A face covered in dirt and mud and blood and tears. The prisoner of the Phantom.

Monty ran a finger over the Phantom's outstretched hand, then continued walking, the *clomp* of her heavy boots a dull cadence on the hardwood floor.

"I kept it, you know," she said.

"What?" Denton turned to her.

"The rose, the flower you gave me that night. I still have it."

"After all these years?"

"Yeah." She smiled. "Upstairs. In my memory box."

"Your what?"

"It's an old cigar box, you know, that I keep stuff in. It's kinda ratty, but one day I was gonna fix it up, stain it, you know, make it pretty - " She sniffed, then wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Shit."

Ward took a step toward her, then another. He held out his hand, but Monty's eyes were focused on the floor, on the dark space between them. Another step and he was at her side. He slid his hand around her waist and pulled her close. She put her hands together, as if she were going to pray then grabbed the collar of his white button down shirt. She curled up next to him, slow dance position. She looked up and the light revealed the dark mascara tears that ran down her cheeks. Denton wiped away one tear, then another.

"I am *so* sorry," he whispered, "but I just gotta know. Make sure she's okay."

"I know." She shrugged. "It's okay."

"No, it's not okay."

"I get all caught up in these things, get too attached - "

Denton went *ssshhh* and placed a finger over her lips.

"Let me make it up to you." He put a finger under her chin then tilted her head so that he could see into her pale blue eyes. "How about another rose for the memory box?"

Monty smiled and buttoned his top button. She straightened his tie, smoothed out the wrinkles in his shirt. When she was done, she gave his chest a gentle pat.

"All done," she said.

"What do you think?"

"I think it'd be nice."

"A little dancing, a little dinner." He kissed her forehead once, kissed her forehead twice. "Get dressed up, whatever you want. I've still got the tux."

"It's not the same." She broke away from his embrace and walked back to her desk.

"I know, but I've got to, Mon," he said. "She needs me."

"I need you."

Denton walked over to the couch and picked up his black trench coat. He pulled it on, drew it tight.

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

Denton patted his pockets and the jingle of keys filled the room. The bottle of pills joined them. He opened his middle drawer and picked out a small clear bottle filled with a clear liquid. It went into the trench coat pocket.

"You coming?" He turned and walked down the long hallway, toward the garage and the sleek black Jaguar that would take him away.

"Yeah," she whispered, *"I'm coming."* She walked over to her desk and picked up her purse. Next to the purse was her house of pencils. She opened her desk drawer and with a single sweep of her hand she demolished it, pushed it into the darkness. She slammed the drawer shut and the house was gone.

Three

The hospital lobby was dark, the only illumination to guide Denton and Monty was the light thrown by the portable television set on the nurse's desk.

"Hello," Denton said. "We're here to - "

"Ssshhh." The nurse raised a finger. The music swelled and a man with long brown hair and a beard kissed a woman with long blonde hair and lots of jewelry. The camera pulled in close, focused on their embrace, then pulled back as the screen faded to black. The commercial came next, a child running around a spotless house with a glass of grape juice in his hand.

"That was nice," the nurse whispered. "Real nice." She smiled a private smile then reached down and opened a drawer near her ankles. Tucked among the many manila folders was a video cassette recorder. She hit a button and the child froze in mid-spill. She closed the drawer with the toe of her white shoe, then turned to face the pair.

"Yes?" she said.

"We're here to see Lisa," Denton said. "I don't know her last name, but - "

"I see." She reached behind her small white hat that was perched on her salt and pepper bun and produced a yellow pencil. She pointed to the wall on her left.

"Do you see that clock, young man?" she said.

"Yes ma'am."

"And what does it say?"

"Eleven forty."

"Now this sign." She tapped on the countertop.

"Visiting hours are from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m."

"Correct again."

"I know, but it's just that - "

"Thank you. Have a good night." She slipped the pencil back under her hat. She dug her heels into the white tiled floor and turned to face the television screen.

"I understand what you're saying," Denton said, "but it's just that we got this phone call - "

"Excuse me?" She turned away from the set.

"We got a phone call from her and - "

"Lisa Rappaport?"

"I think that was her last name," Denton said. "Teenager. Young girl."

"One moment please." The nurse, whose name tag said *A. Holcombe* stood up, then walked past the yellow sign that said *Caution! Wet Floor!*, and out into the hallway. Rows of doors on each side, a small window in each door. Some black, filled with Florida night, some gray with the glow of television sets, some white with the blaze of fluorescents.

"Reggie -" she hissed. "Reggie. Get over here."

They heard the hollow sound of a wooden handle hitting the polished floor, then the squeak of sneakers coming nearer. Reggie, who was also dressed in white, was a curious combination of thick and thin. His hair was thin. He was thin. His black rim glasses were thick. His moustache was thick.

"Yes ma'am?" He stuck his hands in his pockets, then yanked them back out. They moved around him like a pair of skittish parakeets.

"These people tell me that they received a phone call this evening from Lisa Rappaport. Is that true?" The pencil was back, stabbing the air in front of Denton and Monty.

"I - uh - " Reggie put a nicotine stained finger against the bridge of his glasses and pushed them back up on his nose. "Well you see - "

"Did they or did they not receive a phone call?"

"It's like this - I was up, you know, up on the second floor and - "

"That will be all, Reggie."

"She's up there all alone, you know, just her and - "

"Thank you Reggie." The pencil went from mid-air to a yellow legal pad with swift efficiency. Several words written. Pencil replaced. "That will be all."

"Y'see ma'am, it's just that she - "

"That will be *all*."

"Yes ma'am." Reggie gave a quick nod then turned and walked back to his fallen mop.

"Dr. Robbins will hear of this." Nurse Holcombe shook her head

then turned to Denton and Monty. Denton was belted up to the desk, hands folded. Monty was standing on tiptoes, looking at the stack of open files on the other side of the desk. Plain manila folders, stapled Polaroid photo on the left, forms filled with illegible writing on the right.

"Excuse *me*." Nurse Holcombe snapped the top one closed, narrowly missing Monty's nose.

"Sorry." Monty blushed and lowered herself.

Nurse Holcombe closed the remaining folders, the faces blurring, blending into one another like a haphazard slide show.

"I do apologize for this terrible inconvenience, but - "

"It's not an inconvenience," Denton said. "All she did was call for help."

"Nevertheless, Dr. Robbins gave explicit instructions regarding Miss Rappaport and left it to *me* to see that they were followed and - "

" - and you don't like any mistakes on your watch."

"Indeed." She adjusted her hat, patted the bun.

"I hear what you're saying," Denton said, "but if we could just - "

"Those instructions included no unauthorized visitors."

"Well, we're really not unauthorized. She called *us*."

"You're unauthorized as far as Dr. Robbins is concerned."

"She sounded pretty upset on the phone," Denton said. "Maybe we could go up there for a second, you know, just peek in on her?"

"Dr. Robbins gave those instructions for a reason, young man."

"I understand - "

"Do you think that Dr. Robbins has nothing better to do?"

"No ma'am."

"He's a very busy man. He's got a great deal on his mind."

"I'm sure he does, but - "

"If you'd care to come back Monday morning, perhaps he would be able to see you for a moment."

"But it might be too late."

"I'm sorry," she said, "but those are the rules."

Denton thought for a moment, tapped his fingers for a measure or two. "The rules, huh?"

"Yes sir."

"Rules are important."

"Yes sir."

"Wonder what hospital rules say about VCR's and portable televisions?"

"Why I - " Nurse Holcombe cleared her throat. "I don't see what - " She looked over at the set, where the juice was still frozen in mid-air, halfway towards disaster.

"I wonder what Dr. Robbins would say about that? I mean, he trusts you."

“I don't believe that's any - “
“You're his right hand man, making sure that everything goes okay and then *this* happens.”
“Really - “
“Right under your nose,” Denton said. “That can't be good.”
“I want you out of here right *now* young man.”
“I'm not leaving until I see Lisa Rappaport.”
Nurse Holcombe rose to her feet. “I *will* call the police and I *will* have you escorted out of here.”
“Go ahead,” Denton said. “Go ahead.” He threw his arms in the air.
“Denton - “ Monty was tugging on his arm, trying to get him away from the desk. “Den, please - “
“Go ahead and hide behind your rules, your bars, behind your locked doors. I know how it's done. I know how it works.”
“That's it.” Nurse Holcombe reached for the phone. “You're out of here.”
Monty's laugh broke the tension and caused the nurse to pause.
“You know what I don't get?” Monty was shaking her head and smiling.
Nurse Holcombe turned from Denton to Monty. “Excuse me?”
“Why is Blaine with Karena in the first place?” Monty pointed to the set. “Can you explain that one to me?”
“I - well - “ Nurse Holcombe looked at the set, then turned back to Monty. “They *are* married.”
“But he doesn't love her,” Monty said. “He loves Julianna.”
“That's true.” She put down the phone.
“And Julianna loves him, but she's afraid to show it. Wonder why?”
“It's her job,” Nurse Holcombe said. “She's afraid it's beneath him.”
“She's the waitress, right?”
“Yes.”
“Ain't nothing wrong with being a waitress,” Monty said. “Nothin' at all.”
“It's a very good profession.” Nurse Holcombe brushed her fingers across the gold pin at her heart. “An honest profession.”
“He doesn't care about that, but she does.”
“He's a good man.”
“They're perfect for each other, don't you think?”
“I do,” Nurse Holcombe said. “I really do.”
“He's miserable with Karena.”
“He is. I'm certain of it.”
“All you gotta do is look at him.”
“He seems very unhappy. Working all those hours, late at night, all those patients.”

"Patients?" Monty said.

"I'm sorry," Nurse Holcombe said. "Never mind."

Monty paused, watched, thought. "They'd make a cute couple."

"Yes indeed. He's a good man."

"It's gotta hurt Julianna, though; seeing him every day, watching him, but she can't say a thing."

"No." Nurse Holcombe was no longer looking at the set, no longer looking at Monty; her gaze was a thousand miles away.

"Can't let her feelings show. It's gotta hurt."

"It does," Nurse Holcombe said. "It does."

"But he married that other woman. God knows why."

Nurse Holcombe gave a dismissive wave. "Money. Nothing but money. He was young."

"I guess," Monty said. "Money will make you do stupid things."

"It most certainly will."

"Even when someone close to you cares so much."

"I do."

"Love's funny that way," Monty said.

"Yes."

"It's easy to see why these shows are so popular."

"The shows?" Nurse Holcombe broke her reverie. "Yes." She cleared her throat. "Very much so. I've been watching for years." She smiled. "My guilty pleasure. I tape them during the day, when I'm sleeping, then bring them in to watch *when I'm not busy*." She glared at Denton.

"I'm sure you do a great job," Monty said. "Don't you let him bother you." She looked at Denton and rolled her eyes.

"I won't."

"He just gets worked up sometimes."

"I see."

"I'm sure that you and Dr. Robbins care for Lisa just like she was your own."

"We certainly try to."

"Your own little girl." Monty laughed and touched Amanda on the back of her hand.

"Oh please." The nurse's ears turned red. "Stop that."

"You wouldn't let anything happen to her, would you?"

"Most certainly not." She straightened the stack of files, adjusted them so they were flush with each other. "He relies on me a great deal."

"He wants what's best for them."

"He certainly does."

"But that's why we're here. To make sure she's okay."

"I'm sure you are, but I can't let you see her. I really can't."

"Why not?"

"Don't treat me like a fool. I know who he is." Nurse Holcombe

cast another glare at Denton.

“What?” Denton said. “What about me?”

“I’ve seen you. In the papers. At the supermarket.”

“Oh *please*,” Denton said. “You can’t believe that crap.”

“Den - “ Monty elbowed him in the ribs.

“*The Weekly World News?*” He continued. “*A Real Life Ghostbuster? The Exorcist Lives In Florida?* Get real.”

Monty pushed him away from the desk then turned back to Nurse Holcombe. “He’s not normally this rude. I’m sorry.”

“I should hope not.”

“He’s actually a nice guy, but sometimes you just wanna - “

“I’m sure he is, but - “

“You know I actually had to drag him down here tonight? Even after hearing that poor little girl cry over the phone, I had to *force* him to come down here.”

Nurse Holcombe put a hand to her lips. “No.”

“Yes.” Monty slapped the desk. “Didn’t want to come help her.”

“I can’t believe it. She’s such a good little girl.”

“Exactly,” Monty said. “Started gripin’ about how it was our anniversary and how he had it all planned to take me out to dinner, but I said ‘No!’”

“Good for you.”

“I said you’re takin’ me right there, right now, anniversary or not.”

“Happy Anniversary, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Monty said. “I got a new dress.” She turned, arms raised.

“It’s beautiful.” Nurse Holcombe leaned over the desk ledge to get a better look.

“Thanks,” Monty said. “I’m more of a jeans and T-shirt girl myself, but every once in a while, you know -”

“I certainly do.”

“But you know - “ Monty touched her hand again. “You’re a woman. You know how it is. Once you hear that voice - “

“It breaks your heart to hear her go on so.”

“And to be here so long.”

“Close to a month.” She leaned closer to Monty. “It’s shameful, seeing that poor girl, all alone up there.”

“Bein’ alone’s rough, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is.”

“I bet Dr. Robbins is working here night and day to make sure she’s taken care of.”

“He’s very dedicated.”

“I bet.”

“A real professional, even with all the distractions. His wife, their

little girl - why she was just the cutest little thing - it's amazing that he keeps at it like he does."

"He's a good guy, huh?"

"Wonderful. Wonderful man."

"I know you guys don't want anything to happen to her, do you?"

"Certainly not." Nurse Holcombe sat up straight in her chair.

"And neither do we," Monty said. "We just want to go up there for a second, you know, make sure she's okay. Just a quick peek."

"I'm sure that I could talk to him on Monday - "

"I swear to you - what's your first name?"

"Amanda. Amanda Holcombe." She held out a hand, which Monty took in her own.

"I'm glad to meet you Amanda. I'm Monty. Monty Crocetti, and this, as you know, is Denton Ward." Monty motioned to Denton. Denton nodded. Amanda nodded.

"I know you've heard some funny things about us," Monty said, "but I really think that he can help her."

"I don't know." Amanda ran a finger along the edge of the files. "All those stories - "

Denton came back to the desk. "It's their job to sell papers. We're not here to perform some Satanic ritual or anything like that. We're here because a scared young girl called us up in the middle of the night and asked us to be here. That's it."

"I know."

"And all we're asking you to do is give us that chance."

"I'm sure that Dr. Robbins would - "

"He'd do anything to help that girl, wouldn't he?" Monty said.

"Yes he would."

"And he trusts you doesn't he? Counts on you?"

"Yes." She touched her throat, then cleared it. "Yes he does."

"I'm gonna tell you something Amanda," Denton said. "Something that not too many people know."

"What's that?"

He moved closer, leaned over the desk.

"I grew up in a place like this." Denton waved a hand toward the hallway.

"No."

"Yes." Denton put his hands deep into his pockets. "I know what she's going through, Amanda. I know what it feels like to be scared and alone. I know what it's like to hurt, don't you?"

Amanda Holcombe had the thousand yard stare again. Her hand drifted to her pin, to her heart.

"I do."

"To be forgotten? Looked over?"

“Yes.”

“You want to be loved, don't you?”

“Yes.”

“Taken care of?”

“Yes.”

“We can do that for Lisa,” Denton said. “We can help. Let us help your little girl.”

Amanda Holcombe sniffed a few times then wiped her eyes.

“What do you say?” Monty said.

Amanda looked up at the clock, then looked at the drawer that contained her love story.

“I don't think that five minutes would hurt,” she said.

“Thanks,” Monty said. She reached out to touch the nurse's hand, but it was gone. It was done wiping tears. It was busy adjusting the hat, the pencil, the files.

“Five minutes,” Amanda Holcombe said. “No more, no less.” She stood up and straightened her skirt. “And no funny business.”