

FOUR

DEEP THUMPING BASS RIFFS RATTLE THE WINDOWS OF THE junior high gymnasium. A disco ball flashes constellations of light on the banner announcing "Seventies Night." Teenage girls in heavy makeup and hot pants shuffle with awkward adolescent boys in bell-bottom trousers to the grooves of "Dream On" by Aerosmith.

Mike catches his reflection in the pulsating window, and the shocked face staring back at him is about thirteen years old with shoulder-length, curly hair and a few fine, dark whiskers dirtying his lip.

Todd "Skeeter" McGee calls to Mike from the drinking fountain and wipes the drizzle from his chubby face as he waddles over to his friend. "Wendy Crawford is looking for you."

"Wendy Crawford?" Mike's eyes grow wide. "She's the foxiest girl in the whole eighth grade."

Skeeter drags Mike toward Wendy before he can retreat.

Wendy's face lights up when Mike appears. She gazes up at him through feathered brunette bangs and turns up the corners of her cherry lips. Her girlfriends giggle and whisper excitedly to each other.

Mike swallows hard. "Would you, uh, like to dance?"

"Sure," she sweetly replies, locks her arm in his, and escorts him toward the center of the gym as Mike floats along beside her with his head reeling.

A ballad starts to play—"Lady" by Styx—and the once-crowded dance floor instantly becomes deserted. Mike feels his body heat rise, as they are now conspicuously alone under the disco ball. He hopes his palms won't sweat as he places his hands on Wendy's waist. She drapes her arms affectionately around his neck and rests her head on his chest as they rock back and forth. It seems to him as if time has stopped and this perfect moment will last forever.

Mike brushes Wendy's hair from her face and softly caresses her cheek. She looks up, and they stare deeply into each other's eyes. She presses her head forward slowly and wets her red, full lips. Mike's chest swells. His breathing becomes shallow and rapid. Wendy tenderly pulls Mike's face closer, tilts her head, and closes her eyes. He follows, masking his inexperience. He can feel her warm, moist breath on his mouth as their lips draw together.

Suddenly Wendy's body is torn from his arms.

"Michael!" she screams, and the record screeches to a stop.

Mike throws open his eyes and is horrified to see the ubiquitous dark behemoth wrest Wendy's precious form away from him.

"Wendy!" Mike hollers, and lunges toward the putrid horned beast. He catches hold around the girl's waist and clings to her with all his might. The monster's thundering movements shake Mike violently as it drags him through the gym. Students and teachers run screaming in chaos.

Mike then feels his arms being beaten and pried from Wendy's abdomen by the beast's blood-matted claw. "Wendy!" he cries again in desperation.

"Michael," a stern voice replies.

He loses his grip on the girl and crashes to the ground.

"Who is Wendy?" Helen exclaimed, glaring down at Mike, who was lying on the floor next to the bed.

"Who, what?" Mike groaned as he dragged himself back into bed. He was so physically and mentally drained that he didn't even

know whether he was awake or asleep. "I think I hurt my shoulder," he mumbled.

"You were grabbing me, flailing around, and calling me Wendy." Helen scowled. "Who is Wendy?" she demanded.

Mike winced in pain and squirmed on the mattress. "Oh, she's just some junior high school girl."

"What?" Helen's face reddened, and she shoved him halfway off the bed again.

"No! It's not what you think—that's not what I meant." Mike scrambled to his feet. "She's a girl I had a crush on when I was in junior high."

Helen folded her arms across her chest. "Sure," she said.

"I was dreaming," he quickly explained, "that I was back in junior high at a stomp and was slow-dancing with Wendy Crawford. I didn't hurt you did I?"

"No. But I'm really beginning to worry about you and your *dreams*."

"Me too," Mike said, and cautiously climbed back into bed and slipped his arm around his wife. "I could sure use a few more hours of sleep."

"Then the only woman you'd better dream about is me." Helen smiled and slid under the covers.

A smile swept across Diane's face when Mike appeared in the BW lobby later that morning in his best Armani suit. She shuffled papers around her desk as he approached and blurted out, "Good-morning, Mike."

"Hi, Diane," Mike said and grinned at her curious expression.

"Randy is waiting in your office." The receptionist continued to fidget.

"You seem nervous."

"I'm worried about the partnership vote today. Good luck, Mike," she said.

"Thanks, Diane." He held up his crossed fingers, smiled back at her, and continued to his office.

Randy was sitting behind Mike's desk with a handful of M&M'S from the candy dish on his credenza. "How'd the deposition go?" he asked.

"Better than we could've hoped." Mike sank into his couch. "Byars admitted that Kidz Play changed his design. And I found a Kidz Play memo showing that the company knew the Samurobot was defective and would injure thousands of children. You should've seen Byars fuming."

"That's fantastic," Randy said, and grinned at his protégé.

"Kohlberg said to expect a settlement offer this morning. Was there a fax on my chair?"

"No." Randy held up a one-half-inch stack of papers. "But there was a motion for a protective order to prevent us from using any of Mr. Byars's deposition testimony or exhibits."

Mike sighed. "When do those guys sleep?"

Grace burst through the door and handed Mike a paper. "This fax just came for you."

"It's from Kohlberg," Mike observed. "Their settlement offer!"

"The motion is just a negotiation ploy," Randy said.

Mike read the correspondence aloud. "'Dear Mr. Kingston, blah, blah, blah, 'in order to avoid the mounting costs of litigation'"—Mike's voice escalated with anticipation—"we are prepared to offer the plaintiffs \$500,000 each in full settlement of any and all claims they may have against Kidz Play." Mike and Randy raised their fists in triumph.

"What's our contingency in this case?" Randy asked.

"Forty percent."

"So our fees should be about \$1.2 million."

"We hit the jackpot!" Mike exclaimed. He continued to scan the settlement offer. "They didn't agree to take the product off the market. And Kohlberg demands that the parties and attorneys keep the settlement confidential and not cooperate with the other plaintiffs' lawyers. They're trying to buy our silence."

"We'll probably blow the settlement if we insist on withdrawal from the market or refuse to keep the memo confidential," Randy said.

“If we don’t, other kids may be injured,” Mike said. “And I’ll bet all the other copies of the memo are destroyed and Byars is on a beach in Tahiti. But \$3 million is more than enough to compensate our clients.”

“We have leverage with the memo to push for product withdrawal and even nationwide class certification,” Randy said. “Of course our net fees could go down the longer this lawsuit continues, and Warren told me the firm doesn’t want to invest any more in the case.”

The concern Mike didn’t voice was that rejecting the offer would destroy his partnership chances. That would frustrate Helen’s plans for a new home and respect from his disapproving in-laws. He agonized for a moment, then announced, “I just don’t feel comfortable, knowing that other kids will be hurt.”

“I can appreciate your concerns,” Randy said. “I’ll contact my buddy at the Consumer Product Safety Commission and make sure Kidz Play is on his radar. Kohlberg’s offer doesn’t prohibit cooperation with the government as long as we keep our settlement confidential. You can accept the offer with a clear conscience.”

Mike felt as though he could personally do more about the dangerous toy. But pressing for withdrawal would risk the ample settlement for clients and defy the will of the firm. “Okay,” Mike finally acquiesced. “Let’s do the deal.”

“I’m sure your clients will be ecstatic,” Randy said, and slapped Mike on the back on his way out the door.

Mike e-mailed Kohlberg to accept Kidz Play’s settlement offer, conditional upon approval from his clients, then picked up the phone and dialed home. Helen answered, and Mike announced, “Great news, honey.”

“You settled the case,” Helen crowed.

“Kidz Play caved and offered an outrageous amount we couldn’t pass up.”

“That’s terrific news!”

“I promise I’ll be home early tonight. After all, I don’t have a lot of work to do now.”

“I’ll cook your favorite dinner to celebrate.”

“Fantastic. Let’s hope you’re celebrating with the newest BW partner. See you tonight.”

Mike hung up, put his feet on his desk, closed his eyes, and floated on the cloud of eased burdens for a moment. His thoughts turned to his wife and daughter—his long absence from the family that he’d abandoned for so many years for the sake of his career. He’d always rationalized that professional success was necessary to provide a good life for them, but all it really earned him was fractured relationships and bad dreams. He promised himself that he would make it up to his wife and daughter and never again let the firm come before his family.

Mike spent the next few hours sharing war stories with Craig and the other associates and calling his clients to discuss the settlement agreement. This was Laura’s victory too, so Mike arranged a celebratory lunch with the paralegal.

“Congratulations on the huge settlement.” Diane beamed when Mike reached the lobby at lunchtime. “Your clients must be thrilled.”

“Thanks, Diane,” Mike said. He allowed his gaze to linger momentarily on her inviting smile.

Laura arrived and embraced Mike in a congratulatory hug.

“Where are you two headed?” Diane asked.

“Just a victory lunch,” Mike replied in a reassuring tone and escorted Laura to the elevator. The receptionist didn’t know the secret of his relationship with the paralegal, and the last thing he wanted was to start any rumors.

While they dined at the Red Sage, Mike and Laura relived their months of intense litigation and laughed about all the crazy characters and events. As they finished their lunch, Mike raised his water glass and offered a toast “to extracting millions from the evil toy empire.”

They arrived back at the firm and found Craig at the receptionist’s desk getting the brush-off from Diane.

Laura thanked Mike again for lunch, and the attorneys continued to Craig’s office.

“The receptionist seems sweet on you,” Craig said when they had a little privacy. “What a waste. She’s drop-dead gorgeous, and you . . . well, you’re a dork.”

Mike snorted. “Thanks, man.”

“Could you put in a good word for me?” Craig pleaded.

“Since you’re such a *loyal friend*, I’ll find out if Diane’s interested.” Mike shook his head as he wandered back down the hall.

He paused at his secretary’s desk on the way back to his office. “Grace, we need to make sure that everyone in the firm knows the settlement is confidential. Even the receptionist knows the details of the agreement.”

“I haven’t told anybody.” Grace arched her back and put her hands on her hips. “You need to talk to Randy. He’s got a mouth like a bullfrog.”

Mike chuckled. “I’m sure you’re right, but can you e-mail the firm anyway?”

“I understand you’re jumpy waiting for the committee,” Grace said, and handed him a thick fax, “but don’t take it out on me.”

Mike grinned and read the fax cover sheet on his way back to his office. It was a thirty-page draft settlement agreement from Kohlberg, and Mike smiled in amazement.

Mike knew Grace was right. He needed to loosen up. And the settlement agreement was just the thing to occupy his mind while he waited. He put *Abbey Road* into his CD player, seized his red pen, and spent the next few hours analyzing the settlement language and discussing the agreement with the clients he hadn’t reached that morning.

Three albums later, Randy appeared in the doorway. “Howdy, partner.”

“Hey Randy. I’m just going over the draft settlement agreement from Kohlberg.”

“How’s it look, *partner*?”

“Partner? I made it!” Mike yelled and jumped out of his chair.

“The vote was unanimous. There were a few who wavered at first because of the controversial cases you’ve litigated. But when I reported the enormous fee you’re generating from the Kidz Play settlement, everyone on the committee enthusiastically voted to

make you a partner. You made the right decision to take Kidz Play's offer."

"I can't wait to tell Helen."

"It'll have to wait," Randy said. "I was instructed to bring you directly to the main conference room." He grabbed Mike by the arm and steered him down the hall, strutting like a proud father.

"Congratulations!" the crowd shouted in unison when Mike appeared at the conference room door.

Brimming with pride, he stepped into the packed room. His colleagues crowded around the conference table with some of the firm's most important clients, sipping champagne from crystal flutes engraved with the firm's mark.

"A champagne reception for BW's newest partner," Warren Baker announced, and gave Mike a ceremonial handshake. "Congratulations, Mike."

The group applauded and cheered, and Mike smiled and nodded graciously.

"I'm deeply honored to be a member of this firm," Mike proclaimed, "now don't you *associates* have some more hours to bill?"

"Traitor!" Craig hollered, and the crowd burst into laughter.

The party spilled out into the lobby as tuxedoed men with champagne bottles rushed to refill empty glasses.

Abraham Williams pushed his way through the crowd. He handed a glass of champagne to Mike, cleared his throat, and announced, "I'd like to make a toast."

Mike tried to hand the glass back to the senior partner. "Abe, you know I don't drink."

"This is an important day for you, son. You'll drink with us tonight."

Mike reluctantly acceded and raised his glass.

"To the toy killer who grossed us over a million in fees for a few kids with cut fingers."

Glasses clanked, and several people called out "cheers."

"The firm is very proud of you, Mike," Abe said. "Keep up the good work." He smacked Mike solidly on the back and flagged down a waiter for a refill.

Craig squeezed through the pack, grabbed Mike around the chest, and hugged him tight. “Congratulations, buddy. You deserve it.” Craig’s breath and glassy eyes revealed that he’d been responsible for draining his share of the champagne already.

“Thanks, Craig. I wish we were both celebrating partnership.”

“Well, if I hadn’t snuck off with Baker’s daughter at the summer party our first year, I would’ve gotten some good cases and trial experience too.” The bitterness showed through Craig’s liquor-induced candor.

“I can’t believe the firm put this together so fast.” Mike shifted to a new topic.

“Oh, the reception was planned all along. If you didn’t make partner, we would’ve found some other reason to party.”

“I believe it,” Mike said. “Any excuse to drink around here is a good excuse.”

One by one, each of the other attorneys and clients who knew him paid tribute to the new partner. Mike retold his Kidz Play war stories over and over to the delight of the partners who loved the part where he settled the case for \$3 million. However, the celebration soon melded into just another occasion to drink and schmooze.

Time wore on, and the heavy drinkers became loud. Mike continuously tried to make his way to the door, but the closer he got, the more people rushed to give him one last pat on the back. Finally at about 7:45, he abruptly excused himself so he could call his wife.

Diane was tarrying at the reception desk and sprang from her chair when Mike emerged from the conference room.

“What are you still doing here so late?” Mike asked.

“Oh, I told Warren that I would hang around in case the caterers needed something.”

“You must be bored to death.”

“It was worth it,” Diane said, “just to be the first staff member to congratulate you.” She wrapped her arms around him, and he reciprocated. Mike felt himself drawn in by her warm embrace.

“Thanks, Diane,” he said.

“I was just on my way out,” Diane said. “Should I wait for you?”

“I don’t want to hold you up. I need to call my wife and collect my things.”

Diane wrinkled her nose. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Mike hurried back to his office and packed his briefcase. As he reached for the phone to call his wife, Ira Levine charged into his office and gave him a firm handshake.

“Mike, we know that you’ve sacrificed a lot for the firm. We’re very proud that you’ll be an important part of Baker, Williams & Levine for many years to come.” Ira always articulated the full name of the firm as if he felt slighted when people shortened it to BW.

“Thanks, Ira. I’m looking forward to spending the rest of my career here.”

The esteemed attorney strode to the door, stopped at the threshold, and turned back toward Mike. “We expect big things from you.”

“You can count on it,” Mike replied with a proud smile.

Mike’s head reeled from Ira’s compliments and the praise from the other senior partners. He grabbed his briefcase, turned off the lights, and slipped out the back stairway to avoid having to talk with any more tipsy well-wishers.

For the entire commute home that night, Mike sat in silence contemplating his new life. After seven months’ effort litigating the Kidz Play case and seven years’ hard work making partner, total exhaustion followed adrenaline letdown. That day both missions came to a sudden thrilling conclusion. He thought to himself, *Maybe now all these nightmares will stop.*

Mike came into the kitchen through the back door from the garage. All the lights were off, and the house was eerily silent. He set down his briefcase and flipped on the light switch. The fluorescent kitchen lighting spilled into the dining room, and Mike saw Helen sitting alone in the darkness with sullen eyes and crossed arms. She didn’t flinch. The dining room table was set with their wedding china and two long unlit candles.

His tardiness and long hours at the firm had upset Helen many times over the years, but this was by far the worst. He sighed, dropped his head, and prepared to weather the coming tempest.

“Honey, I’m so sorry. The firm hosted a surprise reception for me because—”

“Save it. Your dinner’s in the oven,” Helen railed and stormed away.

“I made partner,” Mike called after her, but Helen’s footsteps grew louder as she stomped upstairs and slammed the bedroom door.

Mike smacked himself in the head and quickly sampled Helen’s cooking, so all of her effort wasn’t completely in vain. As he started his long march up the stairs, Mike realized how profoundly he’d messed up by disregarding his family on this very special occasion.

Helen was lying facedown on the bed sobbing.

“The lasagna is delicious,” Mike said.

She remained still except for the rhythmic quivering of her anguish.

“All the firm and several important clients were at the reception to congratulate me,” he continued, and stepped next to the bed. “I really couldn’t get away any sooner.”

Helen sat bolt upright on the bed. “At least you could have returned my call.”

“I picked up the phone to call,” Mike fumbled for an excuse, “and Ira interrupted—”

“I don’t know if I can trust you anymore,” Helen cried. “Was that hussy *Tanya* there?”

“No!” Mike said, and immediately felt bad for raising his voice. He leaned toward her apologetically.

“Do I smell alcohol on your breath again?” Helen’s face turned red, and she sprang from the bed. “You never drink, and now this is the second time you’ve come home stinking of booze. What is happening to you—to us?”

“I had one glass of champagne,” Mike said. “Abe gave me a glass for a toast and insisted that I drink with him. I swear that’s all I had. I was anxious to get home to see you, but I had to stick around for the back slapping until the party wound down.”

Helen sat on the edge of the bed and quietly wept. Mike settled beside her, brushed her tear-soaked hair away from her eyes, and gently stroked her red cheek.

“I love you so much Helen,” he said, and moisture started to form in his own eyes. “I would never do anything to hurt you or to jeopardize your trust. I’ve had numerous opportunities on business trips to cheat on you—after all I’m a powerful attorney.”

A snort escaped Helen’s nose, and she broke down sobbing. Mike wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her damp brown hair.

“This has been a nightmare for me.” She finally gathered herself to speak. “We haven’t spent any time together in months.”

“After I finalize this settlement agreement tomorrow, I’ll take the rest of the week off. Things will be different now that I’m a partner, I promise.”

Helen looked up at him with hopeful, moist brown eyes. “I want to believe you because I’m so tired of always being second to your mistress.”

“I just explained,” Mike pleaded.

“I mean the *firm*.”

They exchanged a smile that melted away any remaining hostility, and they pressed their radiating bodies together.

“I love you,” Mike whispered in Helen’s ear.

When they finally released their embrace, Mike asked, “Sweetheart, do you mind if I go finish editing the settlement agreement so I can get out of the office earlier tomorrow?”

“That’s fine,” Helen said. “I’m so exhausted anyway that I’ll probably just pass out.”

“You’re wonderful. Good-night, gorgeous.”

Helen planted an ardent kiss on Mike’s wet mouth, and he knew he’d been paroled. He got up to leave, and she tossed a decorative pillow and hit him in the back of the head. She gave him a wry smile and said, “It’s safer for me anyway if you just sleep in the other room.”

Mike laughed and picked up the pillow. He then crept down the hall and tiptoed into Victoria’s room. Remarkably, she was still asleep. Mike caressed her back and stroked her tender face. “Your

daddy's home now," he whispered, and slipped out of his daughter's room.

Mike retrieved the Kidz Play settlement agreement from his briefcase and went back upstairs to the den across from Victoria's room. Soon after he settled into his overstuffed chair and began studying the document, his eyelids grew heavy. He scooted down in the chair, propped the pillow behind his neck, and tried to concentrate on editing. But he quickly succumbed to sleep.

"Daddy!"

"Daddy!" Victoria's piercing voice shrieked again in distress.

Mike leapt from the chair and looked around the room in a haze.

"Daddy!" his daughter screamed again with more urgency.

Mike raced into Victoria's room and swept her into his arms. "What's the matter, princess?"

"Monster," the frightened girl cried, searching for the right words.

"Monster, honey?"

"Monster, room," Victoria sobbed and pointed toward her bedroom door.

"You're just having a bad dream." Mike hummed and glided around the room with Victoria's face resting on his shoulder. Within minutes she was asleep again, and he placed her back into the crib.

Mike crept into his bedroom and quietly put on his nightclothes. Helen was still sleeping soundly, lying on her back in the middle of the ruffled bed. He slid into the diminished bed space next to her and nestled into her shoulder.

Helen's body felt cool, so he pulled the covers up over her, snuggled his arm around her abdomen, and started to drift back to sleep. But something didn't seem right. He couldn't feel her chest rise and fall. He switched on the bedside lamp and examined his wife. In the dim light, her lips had a bluish tint, and her skin appeared pale. She did not move. Terror seized him. His heart raced, and he shook her vigorously.

"Helen, wake up."

Nothing.

“Helen!”

He tapped her firmly on the face. “Honey, please wake up,” he pleaded. Still no movement. “No, no. Please, Lord, no.” Mike began to shake and fumble as he picked up the phone on Helen’s nightstand and dialed 9-1-1.

“Emergency,” the operator responded.

“Please help me. My wife’s not breathing!” Mike could hardly speak.

“What’s your address sir?”

“10537 Mystic Meadow Way, Oakton. Please hurry!” Mike dropped the phone and rushed back to his wife. “Please wake up, Helen,” he begged, and cradled her lifeless form in his arms.

“Sir, have you tried CPR?” the operator called from the handset.

Mike heard “CPR” and took a deep breath to calm himself down. He tried to remember his first-aid training from Boy Scouts and tilted Helen’s head back. He pressed his mouth against his wife’s cold, blue lips and gasped at the memory of Helen’s gentle kiss. Her chest rose and fell with each breath he forced into her lungs, and he desperately imagined that she was breathing. Yet she did not resuscitate. He heard in the distance the faint sound of an ambulance siren, and his hopes soared. “Hang on, sweetheart. Help’s on the way.” Mike clasped his hands together and placed them on Helen’s chest. He pressed down in rapid succession then checked for a pulse. Nothing.

The rising siren spurred Mike on, and he intensified his frantic efforts to restore life to Helen. He didn’t know how much time has passed when two EMTs burst through his bedroom door. His neighbor Nadine was not far behind and diverted to Victoria’s room to comfort the screaming child.

The paramedics, a woman and a man, pushed Mike aside and went to work on Helen. The woman immediately observed the bluish color to Helen’s face. “Cyanosis,” she said, and looked down Helen’s throat. She lifted Helen’s wrist to check her pulse. “The body’s cool, and no heartbeat,” she reported. She placed her fingers on Helen’s neck to check for a carotid pulse. After a brief, ag-

onizing moment, she shook her head and glanced at the man with a look of despair and began to do chest compressions. The man lifted Helen's chin, attached a bag-valve-mask, and started ventilating her.

"Is there anything you can do?" Mike implored.

"We'll do what we can," the woman responded.

The man picked up his radio to contact the hospital.

Mike felt dizzy as he stood over the paramedics. Desperate to wake up from this nightmare, he heard the distant voice of the man report to the hospital, "woman in her early thirties . . . cyanotic . . . apparent asphyxia . . . cause unknown."

"Mommy!" Victoria screamed from down the hall.

At the sound of Victoria's cries, the paramedics exchanged a sympathetic look. "I don't want to see that little girl lose her mother," the woman said. They worked more vigorously to resuscitate Helen. For fifteen minutes they tried to revive her. The result was always the same. They could detect no pulse.

"Pupils . . . fixed and dilated," the man reported somberly to the hospital, and abruptly stopped the ventilation.

The woman reluctantly stopped chest compressions, looked at Mike with moist eyes, and said, "I wish there was something we could've done." She dropped her head and followed the man out of the room.

Mike suddenly felt very cold and alone. He eased onto the bed, cradled his dead wife in his arms, and caressed her frigid limbs.

Too soon, Mike heard the squeaking wheels of the gurney and knew it was time for her to go. He tightened his embrace around Helen's cold torso and gave her one last soft kiss on her spiritless cheek. He tenderly rested her body back on the bed and signaled for the EMTs to finish their job. Mike wiped his eyes and stood to watch as the paramedics lifted Helen's corpse onto the stretcher, covered her with a sheet, and carted her out the door.

They wheeled the gurney past the open door of Victoria's room, where Nadine clutched the anxious toddler in her arms. Nadine gasped in horror at the sight of her friend's lifeless body draped like a ghost floating slowly past. She pressed Victoria's head against her shoulder to protect the child from the awful scene. Mike drifted listlessly behind.

“Michael, what happened?” Nadine asked and struggled to hold back her tears.

Victoria turned with a start and reached for her father, her tiny face wrinkled with distress.

Mike enveloped Nadine and Victoria in his languid arms. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Where’s Mommy?” Victoria whimpered.

Mike’s grief deepened at the sudden realization that Victoria had lost her mother, and his body began to quiver. He searched for the words to explain but found none.

Nadine’s swollen eyes teared up again. “I’ll be around tomorrow to help you,” she said, and abruptly turned and left.

Mike switched off the light and collapsed into the rocking chair, physically and emotionally drained. He lovingly cradled his motherless daughter in his arms and rocked in contemplative silence.