

A House On Night Street

Chapter 1

Andy Simonez—the name he inherited at birth and had been re-introduced to after the car accident; the accident that emptied his memory and short-circuited his life—lay back on the seat, exhausted by yet another vain attempt to get the driver’s attention. The partition that separated them took a pounding from his fists. His speech slurred on every syllable, leaving words half finished, mocking the English language. Angry demands for answers went out into the blackness of night. Strenuous efforts to keep his eyes open were met with an equal urge to want them closed. The candy floss that was his brain spun first one way then the opposite way. Like free-falling in space, and having no idea which way was up, down, north or south, he struggled to keep upright, swaying left then right, trying to steady himself but not able to coordinate his mind with his limbs. There was a seat somewhere below him; he was sure of that since he knew he was in a vehicle that catapulted effortlessly at breakneck speed. *That* sensation was real, but the sensation of being grounded by gravity was not. Everything else kept spinning, floating, soaring, twisting out of shape. Convinced there *was* a driver up front (*someone* must be in charge here, he persuaded his dizzy mind to believe), and yet he couldn’t get the driver’s attention. With nauseating regularity his stomach heaved like he was high on a mast on a little boat in a vast sea, being tossed about by vengeful waves designed to punish him because all the justices had failed to do so. Vomit, still wet, splashed a mucous stain on his pants and jacket; he couldn’t remember actually *being* sick or what he had eaten that would make him so. And worse, he didn’t know where he was or where he was being taken, or why.

Exhausted by his efforts to attract the driver, he fell back on the seat. From his slumped position he tried to focus on the back of the drivers’ head, his vision blurring intermittingly, images in his head shifted randomly, distorted incongruously. Not knowing why his mouth wouldn’t operate with real words, or why the sounds he made were incoherent, he mentally begged the driver to turn around and talk to him, explain to him that it was all a bad joke, that he had the wrong man and he should take him home to his wife. In flashes of clearer vision, the motionless shape of the driver’s head was all he could make out, only to return to the swirling haze. His thoughts circled to find a landing strip,

a place of safety, a haven where reason and sanity co-exist, where he could ask a trusted friend a logical question and get a logical answer. He called out to an acquaintance—Cory, the one person he could rely on for practical jokes—in garbled queries. And laughed at his own misshapen speech. It was so unlike him to be inarticulate. ‘Is that you, Cory?’ he asked, or wanted to ask. ‘Are you responsible for this gag?’ he mumbled inside his head, making a conscious effort to stop the words curling his tongue. ‘C’mon, Cory. What sort of friend are you anyway?’ Andy chuckled at the sounds from his throat, at the inebriated essences that splashed out.

With undignified difficulty, he persuaded his body to a near sitting position and heaved his torso across the deep and wide chasm to the long seat facing him. With all the energy he could muster he pushed his face hard against the toughened plastic see-through screen and forced his gaze at the rear-view mirror, hoping to get a look at the driver’s face. Stirred by the movement behind him, the driver threw a glance at the same time and for a fleeting second their eyes met. Andy’s eyes widened in frightened response; instinctively he pushed his hands hard against the seatback to force his body away from the stranger’s eyes, murmuring within himself that he was unsure whether he knew those eyes, or wanted to know them. Instantly his hopes of finding a friendly face were dashed, and more than that, ruined too were answers as to why he was trapped like a prisoner in the back of a limousine, hurtling through the night.

‘Wait a minute’, he thought, or spoke out loud; he couldn’t tell which. ‘Maybe I can open the door and jump out on a bend, like the hero on TV?’

He dragged himself across the seemingly endless plush seat and reached for the handle. After several attempts, his forefinger found the tiny lever and yanked hard. It wouldn’t budge. A new thought entered the escape plan; to roll the window down and scream out for help. There was no winder. He repeated this hand-eye coordination charade on the other door. ‘What’s going on here?’ he spluttered; a surge of anger climbed from his stomach to his throat. ‘No handles! Who makes cars with no handles?’ he complained audibly; his mind didn’t allow him to deal with electronically controlled doors and windows.

The activity made him tired, sleepy.

He lay still. It felt good. Peaceful. No pressure. No responsibility. Just quiet. So quiet. Like a morgue at midnight. No more questions. No need for answers. No one to hear screams for help. Just lie in the dark. It’s better this way. Make up new questions. Invent a new set of answers. Listen to distant voices instead. Listening is good. And thinking. That’s good, too.

Gradually his stomach settled, and his head didn’t spin as before, but now he had a strong urge to empty his bladder. He shouted out, in no uncertain terms,

his dire need to urinate, and if the driver didn't stop the car and find a suitable tree he would let nature take its course and make a mess on his carpet. Now, for the first time, the strong smell of alcohol reached his nostrils; there was no one else around so he conceded it must be coming from his clothing, and remembered the quaint face he met earlier, the stranger who approached him with a wry grin, slurred speech, and a cruelly pot-holed nose.

Whether the driver heard his plea, clearly or muffled or not at all, he kept the throttle down; the engine didn't drop a rev but purred onward relentlessly into the darkness, into the rain-soaked night.

As the car sped on, objects seemed to whiz by like a moving screen depicting items frame by frame; trees, houses, horses in paddocks, large trucks with blazing lights. Intermittent flashes of memory clicked on and off in between scenes... Miriam in her stunning red dress... Todd Wybern with his raised glass and wide smile... an orchestra pouring out soft music, filling all the empty spaces with lilting tones accompanied by the sound-alike voice of Sinatra singing *My Way*.

'How did I get here? In this limo?' he queried his head. An attempt to retrieve recent events failed; he could make no sense of his dilemma.

Memories came suddenly and left quickly like invited guests ousted for bad behaviour. With the passing of each mile, his head began to clear, his vision improved and he began to focus with greater perception, no longer blurry around the edges. For the umpteenth time, he sat back in his seat mentally exhausted by the effort to remember. Once again he tried, this time pressing his hands against his temples, concentrating hard on the short bursts of memory.

Dean Tarkin! He was the main speaker at the function! Andy's eyes widened as the events of the previous hours unfolded in his head. Yes, it was a fundraiser for Stephen Masters, the likely candidate for the next Mayor. The raucous sound of applause, the piercing whistling of a thousand people lived again in his ears as Dean concluded his rousing pre-victory speech on behalf of his mentor, Masters, a self-made man.

Eyes now closed to aid his focus, Andy recalled that Miriam and he were on the prestigious guest list because of their support and contributions, and their personal friendship with Cory Woods, chief assistant to Margo Elizabeth Parker, the fundraiser for many a glory-seeker in various fields of endeavour.

His head told him that the champagne flowed freely, but that was odd, because, except for an occasional glass of wine, alcohol was not on his menu. Even the waiters and other catering staff were partying. Tables smothered with a smorgasbord of seafood and other delicacies ran along both sides of the large reception hall and as the centre of the floor was opened up to dancing, other

guests filtered into the adjoining rooms for chit-chat or private dalliances. A memory of someone offering him a drink burst into his brain, he recalled in a vague sort of way telling *that someone* he was ok, that he'd stick with fruit juice, but the person insisted he accept the glass. In his head, he heard his voice reiterate that he was the designated driver, so when different ones would offer to fill his glass, he'd place his hand on top and politely decline, giving the line: "Who is going to drive my gorgeous wife home safely?" But *someone* did cajole him into one for the road. 'Who was that?' he queried out loud, opening his eyes again as though requesting an answer from a co-passenger.

The car screeched around a sharp left-hand bend, drowning his question, and being totally unprepared for the sudden change in direction the manoeuvre threw him hard against the opposite side. Jolting him out of his thoughts and hurling him back to the speeding, runaway vehicle the reality that he was captive to a dangerous and crazy driver returned. The face, indeed the voice, of that *someone* who gave him the drink was obscure. But the eyes? *Oh yes, there was something about those eyes.*

Andy's mind raced frantically trying to slot the face into a pigeonhole, to extract it from the deep recesses of his memory bank. Nothing came to him. He did likewise with the stranger's voice, straining to recall where he might have heard it before. Again he came up blank, except for a few words: *Frank appreciates your support...be in touch.....Friday, July 26th.*



Breaks in the fog that misted his thoughts revealed the stranger easing his near-empty glass from his fist and shoving a new one in its place before he had a chance to say no thanks. Anyway, how could he refuse, Andy reasoned, since it was from Frank R Enright, the man responsible for dozens of high-rise buildings in London and someone he relied upon for much of his business? Miriam was the interior designer for all of his projects. Through her, Andy acquired the contracts for the furnishings, fittings and everything else that filled his buildings, from the carpets to the paint, floor to ceiling, wall to wall. A good contract to have, he assured himself, and not to be lost by refusing a complimentary drink.

Sometime during the evening, but couldn't pinpoint precisely when, he recalled being dizzy and motioned to someone, presumably to Miriam, that he needed to get outside for fresh air. How long after that, he couldn't tell, but he felt strong hands under his armpits, then being manhandled for what seemed like forever and ending up on the back seat of a car. He recalled hearing voices using unintelligible words. Someone near him said something that sounded like 'too much champagne'. In a desperate bid to utter sounds, *any* sounds that might

attract attention to his plight, his lips were unable to form letters or words, his tongue rolled around his mouth uncontrollably. His legs didn't seem to be able to touch the ground. Whoever had a hold of him supported his frame to convince onlookers that he needed help because he'd had too much to drink. Some images were vivid, like the long black limousine, and the sensation of being manhandled to the waiting vehicle. There were more sounds, like voices, but distorted. The sound of a car door slamming reverberated in his ears but it felt like it was a long way off. His stomach heaved as the car lurched forward. His head wouldn't stop spinning; eyes wouldn't focus. He let his thoughts meander.



His brain told him he must have passed out or gone into a kind of induced sleep. Then it struck him hard. He was drugged! Deliberately and skilfully by clever people who manoeuvred him out of the middle of a large gathering of the beau monde and into a limousine! Who? And why? He begged again and again for answers. A few friends who might play a hoax on him came to mind, but none who would go this far! Certainly not debilitating drugs! And even if they did play a game, he argued, why go to such a low level? Nothing he ever did in fun would warrant such a retaliatory trick. No, they would not stoop this low! Where to from here? Can't talk to anyone while trapped in this car! And the driver is certainly not user-friendly!

Did the stranger who shoved a drink in his fist really speak for Frank R? Or did he have another agenda? Why didn't the entrepreneur come over and say it personally, Andy reasoned, since Miriam and her boss enjoyed an excellent working relationship? Frank R has a definite aloofness about him, Andy knew, either by nature or business status or whatever, but regular discussions over lunch about design plans and décor were the norm, were business-oriented and always satisfying. The man has widespread tastes on furniture and art and incorporates his ideas into his apartment buildings, and mostly Miriam accommodated his viewpoint when she sits down to work. Andy confirmed his belief that Frank had nothing to do with that man, that stranger.

Maybe, Andy queried, just maybe, the driver is the stranger who gave him the potent drink!



With puzzling feelings grid-locking his head, Andy tried to figure things out, thinking how the events of the night might all fit together to make some kind of sense. The riddles in his mind were interrupted by a distinct change in speed

and direction as the car slowed to a pedestrian pace. The noise the tyres made told him he was no longer on a regular hard-surfaced road. As it ground its tyres over what felt like popcorn—in reality millions of round pebbles—the limousine eased up a left-hand long sweeping driveway and came to a crunchy stop in front of an imposing building under a full moon dimmed by wispy clouds. The rain had all but stopped but the wind had strengthened to a firm breeze that bent the upper frame of a decorative pine tree back and forth across the face of an upstairs window, the only room in the large house that gave out light. As the tree moved to and fro it blocked and emitted a golden light intermittently, like a beacon light. On, Off. On, Off. Andy's attention was immediately drawn to the figure of a squat, round man, whose silhouette almost filled the window frame. With a brief motion of his hand, as if to signal the driver into action the shadow moved from the window and disappeared from view. Moments later a light shone above the bulky oak door and flooded the main entrance with a welcome glow, a welcoming invitation out of a cold, dark, wet and windy night.

The driver switched off the purring engine, unbuckled his seatbelt, glanced at his passenger, opened the door and slid out of the vehicle. Intense light streamed upon the granite flight of steps as the huge door swung in on its massive hinges, revealing features of its ornate leadlight of gracious birds with long necks and brightly-coloured flowers on each side. Another man, a tall thin fit-looking man in his late sixties, approached the driver and spoke softly in his ear. The driver nodded assertively and they both came to the rear-passenger door. An electronic key aimed at the front of the limo produced a barely audible *click-click*. The tall thin man addressed the door, opened it, and to the passenger said: 'Mr Andrew Simonez, I believe?' Not knowing what or who to expect, Andy nodded and said 'Yeah, yeah. What's going on?'

'Please step out of the vehicle', tall thin man spoke politely and respectfully. By now Andy was able to pull himself out of the car without the kind of help he needed to get in. Tall thin man offered his hand to formally introduce himself. 'My name is Samuel Harper' — unsure of what was next Andy reached his hand forward and as the two men clasped hands the chauffeur clamped handcuffs on Andy's wrist—'former Chief of Police', the older man finished. Taken aback by the quick action and surprised by its efficiency, his first reaction was to get free. With his back pressed against the car and a man on either side of him, he had nowhere to go except to pull his hand back sharply, which only brought his captor closer to him.

'Exactly what is going on here'? Andy angrily searched their eyes in turn for an answer and found a stern look of condemnation. He forced a half grin and said 'Am I under arrest, officer?' The driver stepped even closer to Andy so that the space between their faces was less than three inches, and speaking with clear,

categorical, reverberating tones: 'You most certainly *are* under arrest!'

The driver stood back from Andy and turned his face to the light from the house as if to give Andy a fuller view of his captor. To emphasise it more and to remove any doubt of whose identity was to be revealed, the clouds drifted slowly past the moon, as if by design, exposing its brilliance on the trio below. The driver took off his cap as if he was acting on a stage, shook his mop of copper hair, threw his head back with flare, caught Andy's own gaze, and asked: 'Do you recognise me? Do you, Mr Simonez?'

Andy Simonez stood there stunned, unable to speak, unable to move. His gaze could only take in the young, clean and fresh complexion of his apparent plaintiff and accuser. The distinctive nose and those amber eyes! He didn't know the man, but the face! Yes, *the face and features were oddly familiar*. Again he was confused, just as he was in the car when he encountered those eyes in the mirror. And yet, somewhere in his past, a vague recollection lingered in his mind. An uneasy sensation in the depths of his being told him that this memory would return to give him grief. This man, this pseudo chauffeur was not the 'stranger' who filled his glass with a toxic mix, but someone like him, who surely must also be part of this scheme. Andy Simonez attempted to choose words in reply that would not antagonise an already angry man and escalate an already sensitive situation. Cautiously, he began: 'You seem to know me from somewhere; you have me at a disadvantage'. Before a response was given, the ex- policeman touched the younger man's arm and spoke directly to Simonez:

'You don't have to say anything, but if you do, what you say may be used against you in a court of law. You have been warned, Mr Simonez! And now, may we escort you to the house?' Harper's latter tones were congenial.

Bound together, as if joined in a cause, the young man tugged on the handcuffs and with his free hand he motioned to Simonez to start towards the steps. The prisoner, in turn, complained how the whole thing was a charade, how ridiculous it was and that he needed to make a phone call. His complaint and request were jointly ignored. The two men gently pushed him in the direction of the great door, disregarding his protest about 'being here against his will'. Once inside, the door was quietly closed. The light went out in the entranceway; the clouds swam to cover the moon and the night returned to its familiar blackness that coincides with two a.m.