

# Hammond's Choice

*A Marty Fenton Mystery Novel*



By Bob Cohen

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Bob Cohen

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For  
Robert Dunford and Joel Silverman  
and  
to the sweet memory of Jim Victor

Most of the things we decide are not what we know to be best.  
We say yes, merely because we are driven into a corner and must  
say something.

—Frank Crane

## PROLOGUE

*She had always considered herself a patient person. Rome wasn't built in a day; one step at a time. Good things take a long time. These clichés made sense to her and she felt pride in her ability to set personal goals and methodically achieve them. Obstacles in her course did not bother her. She would patiently figure out how to get around or remove whatever stood in her way. When the obstruction was a person she would smile and calmly persist until the individual realized she was not going away and would step aside.*

*But this was different. She had waited so long she sometimes wondered if it would ever happen. But when it did happen, when her beautiful baby was ready to be delivered, she knew it had been worth every minute of anxious anticipation.*

*Drawing upon a reserve beyond the wall of fatigue that had fallen on her, she bore down and pushed with all of her might. Her face turned crimson, the cords in her neck looked as if they would snap, but she kept pushing. Even when the doctor told her he was out, even after her baby uttered his first cry, she was reluctant to stop pushing, afraid her son might become stuck. It took the gentle touch of a nurse to convince her to let go. Placing a warm hand on her brow, the nurse whispered into her ear, it's okay, he's arrived, he's with you now.*

*She looked up and saw her husband dressed in a green paper gown and cap, holding a tiny red-faced infant swaddled in a pale blue blanket. Even through her exhaustion she could see her son's distinctive features: a surprising patch of thick black hair, wrinkled ears pressed against the side of his head, and dark eyes that seemed to be searching for her.*

*Backlit by the bright lights of the operating room, her husband and son appeared to be surrounded by a halo. She took a deep breath and exhaled,*

*allowing herself to enjoy the sight of the two most important men in her life. At that moment she felt her heart might burst. She had just experienced a miracle and the love she felt for her husband and son were so intense the only thing she could do was to cry.*

*That image, so vivid and sustaining, would remain with her a long time, resurfacing at special as well as ordinary moments: Giving her infant son a bath and listening to his squeals of delight as she bathed his smooth, pink body, she would remember the three of them in the delivery room. Stifling a giggle as she watched her husband struggling to assemble the portable swing the instructions had promised could be put together in less than five minutes, she remembered how calm he seemed to be in the delivery room. For years, the image of her husband holding their newborn son filled her with love and hope and the sense that their life was whole.*

*Looking back, she sometimes wondered which had begun to fall apart first: the image or the reality. She eventually concluded that it didn't matter, though she desperately tried to hold on to both, even after the halo had faded and she began to question whether it was, in fact, a miracle that God had bestowed upon her the day Tommy was born.*

## CHAPTER ONE

On my last day at Kuperstein Discreet Surveillance, my supervisor, Mr. Gresh, a man of few words, called me into his office and shared his appraisal of my performance: “Neatness and cleanliness: B; ability to judge character: C-; perseverance: B+; physical and mental toughness: D-; technical skills: C-; able to follow directions: D; overall competence: C-. I hope you’ll be a better graduate student than you were an investigator.”

I was confident that I would. Not only could I make better use of my intellectual ability, but the prospect of conducting research in social psychology was a lot more appealing than sitting in a car waiting for our client’s husband to show up at his mistress’ mobile home. Besides, Syracuse University was more than four hundred miles from Toledo and the watchful eye of my mother. It had taken me awhile, but at thirty-seven I was finally on the right path.

Nearly two years later, as I struggled to finish my master’s thesis, I wasn’t so confident.

I had spent the morning in the computer lab mulling over my thesis data. Although I hadn’t made much progress on the statistical analysis, sitting at the computer gazing into cyberspace for three hours had definitely stimulated my appetite. I decided to go to Cosmo’s. Their pizza was good and the price was right. I was finishing my second slice when I saw a heavy man in a cream-colored poplin windbreaker push open the front door and walk into the pizzeria.

Definitely not my day, I thought as I watched the last person I wanted to see wade into the small crowd of students standing in the aisle.

Professor Mike Singleton was a study in contrasts. On the inside he

was neat, organized and extremely sharp. He had a photographic memory and an analytic mind that could, with equal ease, perform a complex non-parametric statistical computation or formulate the relationship between the savings and loan industry collapse and the absence of age-appropriate role expectations for children of the Kennedy era.

On the outside he was anything but neat. At five foot eight inches and more than two hundred pounds, he could best be described as rotund. His frizzy red hair was rarely cut and never combed, and his manner of dress was unique. He seemed to take pride in creating unusual combinations of color and patterns: A yellow and red striped shirt with black and white checked slacks one day might be followed by an orange shirt with brown polka dots, whose shirttail fell almost to the knees of his electric blue rayon trousers. If the occasion called for it, he might add a bright crimson tie from his alma mater, Harvard.

Singleton's wife, Mary, who is a master of understatement, once characterized his mode of dress as primitive eclecticism.

The professor's unorthodox appearance did little to detract from his popularity with students. He was one of the most highly rated teachers on campus and his course on the *Social Psychology of Late 20th Century Courting Behavior and Other Peculiar Human Rituals* was always oversubscribed. Graduate students pleaded with him to serve as their advisor. One student was so anxious to have Singleton as his mentor he offered to work as a research assistant without pay for a full year.

Like all great teachers, Singleton's strength lay not only in the amount of knowledge he possessed but in the passion with which he approached the subject matter. Standing in front of the lecture hall, trying to explain the concept of cognitive dissonance to a group of undergraduate students, Professor Singleton would become so excited that his hands would begin to quiver and his bushy red hair would bounce up and down.

As much as I liked and admired Professor Singleton, I definitely did not want to see him today. More accurately, I did not want him to see me.

A week ago I had assured him . . . no, *promised* him I would complete the analysis of my thesis data and have a first draft of the results written by today. My intentions were good, but my follow-through was weak. Last night, after a week of intense procrastination, I had been fully prepared

## Hammond's Choice

to drive over to the computer lab and crunch some numbers. Then I was going to prepare a concise report of the results of my study, which undoubtedly would be acclaimed as a major scientific breakthrough in the field of social psychology.

Unfortunately, just as I was about to leave my apartment, my girlfriend Ollie had called to invite me over to her place for a brief visit. We were having some problems and I really needed to concentrate on my thesis. I told her I would catch up with her later. After I hung up I told myself I wasn't reverting to my typical mode of procrastination, that I really had to focus on my data. I almost convinced myself.

I had deliberately chosen Cosmo's because I knew Singleton was a man of habit. And he detested pizza. Every day at noon he walked down to the Varsity Restaurant, ordered a chicken salad sandwich on rye and a diet Coke, which he proceeded to devour in less than three minutes. He then returned to his office where he would read the latest issue of one of the many psychology journals to which he subscribed before walking up the hill to teach his one o'clock class.

I had clearly overestimated the strength of Singleton's habit.

That was my second mistake.

Watching the professor squeeze through the cluster of students, I slouched down in the booth, hoping he wouldn't see me. With any luck, his overstuffed briefcase would be jostled from his arms, spilling papers and books onto the floor. While Singleton frantically tried to retrieve his belongings I would quietly slip out of the booth and escape.

Apparently I was not going to have any luck today. Clutching his briefcase to his chest, Singleton wove through the crowd at what was for him warp speed.

"Ah, Martin," Singleton said, pulling up next to my booth. "I was hoping to find you here."

Realizing there was no way to escape, I opted for the next best alternative. "I know you're disappointed in me. I have no excuse to offer. I planned to do it and I didn't. That's all there is to it."

Knowing that Singleton was fond of Rotter's theory of locus of control, I hoped that my admission of culpability, my willingness to accept responsibility for my own actions (or lack of action in this instance) would temper his disappointment.

To my surprise, Professor Singleton did not appear to be interested in either my thesis or my locus of control.

“Do you have a moment?” Singleton asked. Dropping his briefcase on the table, he slid into the seat across from me. He didn’t wait for a reply to his question. “I just came from a discussion with Dr. Barker, a colleague of mine. You may know Dr. Barker. He teaches in the clinical psychology division. He told me of a very troubling situation with one of his clients. I thought you might be able to help him.”

I had heard of Dr. Barker but had not met him. Usually I tried to avoid the clinical psychology program. The clinical graduate students had a reputation of being more intense, more competitive than those in other divisions. If I were a clinician—which I am not and have no desire to be—I might have described their behavior as neurotic. From my limited experience with the faculty in the clinical program they served as pretty good role models for their protégés.

Professor Barker, on the other hand, had a solid reputation. By all accounts he was a dedicated teacher, skilled therapist, and competent researcher. Even more important, he appeared to be a fair and reasonable man who never missed an SU basketball home game.

For all those reasons, plus the fact that responding to Professor Singleton’s request for help would postpone the inevitable embarrassing confrontation about my thesis work, I decided to pursue his request.

“What kind of trouble?” I asked.

“It’s quite complicated,” Singleton responded. “I think it would be better if you spoke directly to Dr. Barker.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to suppress my glee about the prospect of escaping unscathed. “What would be the best way of reaching Dr. Barker?”

“I knew I could count on you, Martin. Based on the probability that I would find you and you would be gracious enough to be willing to assist him, I arranged for Dr. Barker to be in his office at one forty-five, right after his psychotherapy seminar. He’s in room 327 of the old Good Shepherd Hospital on University Avenue. He’ll be expecting you.”

Professor Singleton slid out of the booth and glanced at his watch. “That gives you twenty minutes, Martin. Please be prompt.” Then he picked up his briefcase and walked quickly toward the exit, pushing his

## Hammond's Choice

way through the crowd of waiting students.

Watching him waddle down the aisle, I realized, once again, what a masterful psychologist he was. Without saying a word he had managed to stoke my guilt to bonfire proportions, while at the same time presenting me with a clear path from the flames to a cool, inviting channel of redemption—helping Dr. Barker with his dilemma. Shaking my head in awe, I picked up a slice of pepperoni pizza from the plate and took a large bite.

The pizza was cold.

The old Good Shepherd Hospital was actually not very old. Built after World War II, its glass and chrome facade gave it a contemporary appearance. It had once served as a rehabilitation hospital, but the movement toward outpatient care and the erection of the huge Upstate Medical Center several blocks away had rendered the hospital obsolete.

With the student infirmary located on the first floor, the building retained its status as a health care facility. The second and third stories were occupied by the clinical psychology and counseling graduate programs. There was a standing joke that the infirmary had been strategically placed to serve as a safety net for students who came within harm's way of the graduate degree programs.

No one had ever refuted this theory.

When the weather was bad, which was most of the time in Syracuse, one could enter through Huntington Hall, directly across the street from Cosmos. Huntington Hall (also a former hospital) was built perpendicular to Good Shepherd. At the far left end of Huntington Hall was an indoor walkway that allowed one to enter the Good Shepherd Building without battling the elements.

Today was one of those days I decided to take advantage of the sheltered route. It was a blustery April day with the temperature in the forties and a steady drizzle that seemed to blow directly into my face regardless of which way I was facing.

Although I grew up in the Northeast—Teaneck, New Jersey to be precise—I was not prepared for the long, hard winters of central New York. The snow often started in October and usually didn't stop until the end of April. One spring I celebrated Memorial Day with an abbreviated

snowball fight at a picnic on the northern shore of Onondaga Lake. We had just finished a huge meal of Italian sausage, Polish sausage and American hamburger (even then we were culturally diverse) and were walking in the woods when we discovered a large mound of unmelted snow.

I don't think I'll ever become accustomed to Syracuse weather.

Dr. Matthew Barker was waiting for me at the entrance to his office. He was a small, thin man with narrow shoulders who obviously paid a lot of attention to his appearance. His black hair had a few gray streaks at the temples and was neatly layered to make his narrow head seem wider. He wore a navy blue cashmere blazer over a blue pinstripe shirt and an imported burgundy silk tie with a muted floral design. His charcoal flannel slacks had a crisp crease and his black leather Italian loafers were freshly polished.

The only thing about him that wasn't totally neat and smooth was his forehead, which had several deep wrinkles. In spite of his furrowed brow his face had an aura of tranquility. As he shook my hand my immediate reaction was to let down my guard and tell him about the awful day I was having.

At that moment, looking into his pale blue eyes, I understood why he had such an excellent reputation as a therapist.

"It was kind of you to meet with me at such short notice," Barker said in a voice as mellow as Manilow. "Please make yourself comfortable," he said, gesturing toward a dark blue Lazy Boy recliner.

Looking at the plush chair with its thick cushion, I felt a twinge of anxiety. Was I actually afraid that if I sank into one of those chairs I would blurt out my deep, dark secrets? My reaction was particularly frightening since, as far as I knew, I didn't have any secrets that were deeper and darker than my failure to write up my thesis results.

I controlled my anxiety and sat in the chair farthest from Dr. Barker. He pulled a small gray tweed armchair away from the wall and placed it at a right angle to mine. Easing himself slowly into the chair he pressed together the palms of his hands and rested his chin on his fingertips. "Did Mike tell you anything about my client's problem?" he asked.

"No, Professor Singleton said it would be better if you explained it to me." It was difficult switching roles. As a student I always called Singleton

## Hammond's Choice

“Professor” or “Doctor”. All of his students did in spite of his casual, informal manner. I guess we were awestruck by his incredible mind and the wealth of knowledge he possessed. Now, in my role as investigator, in the presence of another faculty member, I was unsure of how to refer to him.

I chose the safer alternative.

Barker gazed at me for a moment. I wondered whether he was reading my mind. He seemed so perceptive. Maybe he was having second thoughts about asking a graduate student, an *ambivalent* graduate student no less, to help his client. I waited anxiously, expecting the worst.

Finally, Barker lowered his hands to his lap. “You understand, of course, that the rules of confidentiality apply here,” he said softly.

I nodded.

“This is a delicate matter. My clients have asked me to assist them. But until they sign a release indicating their willingness to give information to you, I am limited in my ability to share with you specific details of their situation.”

I knew about confidentiality from the correspondence course on private investigation I took several years ago while doing an apprenticeship with a well-known investigatory agency. I quit the job shortly after I completed the apprenticeship—there were too many rules and restrictions— but I passed the course and qualified for my license.

I also knew about therapist-client confidentiality from a course on abnormal psychology I had taken, but I didn't understand how that actually worked.

“What I will do,” Barker said, “is describe the situation in hypothetical terms, leaving out any identifying information. If you decide that you might be able to help and my clients express interest in retaining you, I will have them sign a release so I may put you in touch with them.”

It sounded complicated, but what did I know. I was a mere social psychology graduate student, not at all well-versed in the practice of psychotherapy. “You mentioned *clients*,” I said. “From my discussion with Professor Singleton I was under the impression there was only one client.” I hoped that Barker noticed my perceptiveness.

“Let's say that we're speaking about a couple, a husband and wife.” Barker was obviously not impressed. “Let's say this couple has a son.

They're both in their mid-thirties when the boy is born and he quickly becomes the center of their universe. As an infant he is cute and bubbly and almost always happy. A simple smile from him melts his parents' hearts. But as this boy grows older he changes. He does not enjoy the company of others, becomes quite upset when his routine is disturbed, and sometimes strikes out unpredictably, smashing his toys or anything else within his reach."

I wondered where he was going with all of this. I hoped he didn't expect me to work with this child. Surely Professor Singleton had told them I wasn't on the helping side of psychology.

"The parents are frantic," he continued. "They don't understand why this has happened. They turn to professionals for help, but no one is even able to give them a good explanation of why their sweet little boy is so unhappy and explosive. The boy's behavior continues to deteriorate. At first they hold out hope that this is a passing phase, a normal stage of development. Eventually they can no longer avoid the truth: their son has serious emotional problems, so serious in fact that he requires intensive treatment in a setting where he can be supervised twenty-four hours a day."

"You mean like a psychiatric hospital?"

"No. He has been stabilized, at least to the extent that he can be," Barker explained. "This child, or I should say adolescent, since he's fourteen years old, would be in a residential treatment center which provides a comprehensive therapeutic milieu."

"Therapeutic milieu?" I asked, once again showing my ignorance.

"I'm sorry," Barker said, smiling apologetically. "I assumed that since you were in psychology you would be familiar with our jargon. Sometimes I think we create terminology just to make sure that people outside our profession can't understand our field and need us to translate the jargon for them; sort of a job security ploy on our part. Anyway, therapeutic milieu is a fancy term for using the setting where a person eats, works and plays as a means for helping him or her deal with their problems. By structuring all of the elements of the living situation—people, activities, even the physical space—into a positive, supportive learning environment, mental health professionals believe they can help persons with mental disorders function better. Clinicians use the milieu to help

## Hammond's Choice

residents increase their social and daily living skills, learn more effective ways to cope with stress and enhance their self-esteem.”

“Oh, I get it. Like the program they used in *A Clockwork Orange*.”

Barker smiled. “Touché, Mr. Fenton. I suppose I deserve that for being so esoteric. Actually milieu programs can be quite effective if those in charge avoid the typical institutional pitfalls.”

“Translate, please,” I liked that Barker was able to acknowledge his own shortcomings. I was beginning to feel more at ease with him.

“Sorry again,” he chuckled. “What I meant to say is that all therapeutic interventions, including milieu programs, should always be focused on one overriding purpose: to return the person to their natural environment, to their community and, if at all possible, to their own home. Unfortunately it is too easy for staff in a restrictive setting, like a hospital or residential treatment center, to forget that goal. Since institutions almost always act to perpetuate themselves, there is a risk that the staff will be more concerned about protecting the established order than helping the client function in the community.”

“Is that what’s happened to this hypothetical adolescent?”

“I don’t really know much about the program he’s in, but that’s not the reason his parents need help. This particular boy has a very serious problem.”

“But what can I do to help?” I asked, feeling confused, “I’m not trained in clinical psychology.”

“I know, Mr. Fenton. This youngster’s problems are beyond the realm of psychology.”

“What do you mean?”

Barker cleared his throat and leaned forward. “The boy we’re speaking about has been accused of killing one of the other children in the program.”

## CHAPTER TWO

*Too many staff. And who are these other people? They should go away. Just leave me alone. I'm tired. I don't feel good. Leave me alone.*

I felt as if I were standing in a warm shower and the water suddenly turned ice-cold. “Jesus,” I said, sucking in my breath. “Did you say killed?”

“I’m afraid so,” Barker replied. His pale blue eyes now looked sad. “You can imagine how shocked his parents were when they were told. I worked with the boy several years ago and even though I knew he had some serious problems I was stunned by the news.” He paused and looked up at the ceiling. With his brow furrowed even more than it had been, he appeared to be deep in thought. After a few seconds he lowered his head and looked directly into my eyes. “I’m tempted to tell you more, but I don’t want to compromise the family’s confidentiality. Do you think you would be willing to talk to them, to see if you might be able to help?”

“I . . . I don’t know. This is a little bit out of my league. I’ve dealt with adultery, insurance scams . . . even a missing person, once. But *murder*. That’s a whole different category. Don’t they have a lawyer?”

Barker shook his head slowly. “It’s a complicated situation, Marty,” he said. “I know you’re not a seasoned veteran. But Mike speaks highly of you. He says you’re bright and perceptive, that you have an uncanny knack for solving puzzles. He also says you have a strong sense of justice, especially when it comes to the underdog. Mike’s recommendation means a lot to me.”

His flattery rendered me speechless. It was true that I have a knack for puzzles, always have. When I was a kid I would work on anything

## Hammond's Choice

I could get my hands on: crosswords, jigsaws, and anagrams. It didn't matter what type of puzzle it was as long as it distracted me from my mother's constant prodding.

After awhile I did puzzles even when my mother wasn't nudging me. Now, even though I live several hundred miles away from my mother, I continue to be a puzzle junkie.

Aside from his comment about being good at puzzles, I didn't recognize anything in Barker's statement that resembled me. I consider myself to be an ordinary person. True, I am a little older than your average graduate student, but that's not an achievement likely to get me inducted into the Sherlock Holmes Hall of Fame.

Either Professor Singleton saw something in me that I wasn't aware of, or he was once again playing with my mind, trying to persuade me to help Dr. Barker.

I was betting on his prowess as a psychologist.

But it really didn't matter.

"Okay," I said reluctantly. "I'll give it a shot."

"Very good," Barker responded, giving me a warm smile. He seemed relieved. "I don't anticipate any complications with my clients. I'll speak with them later this afternoon and get back to you this evening if that's okay with you."

"Sure, I should be home after nine." This was the night I worked as a volunteer tutor at Huntington Family Center. I was usually finished by eight-thirty and home by nine.

"I'll call you by ten," Barker said. "Mike told me you're working hard to complete your thesis. I wouldn't want to keep you from your scholarly pursuit."

He spoke in a matter-of-fact manner. There was no hint of irony in his voice, no indication that he was poking fun at me.

But the small curl in his lip told me clearly that the good Professor Singleton had briefed Dr. Barker on my procrastinating ways.

Professor Barker's reference to my academic work habits didn't have a significant effect on my productivity. After I left his office I went directly to the library, hoping to complete the first draft of the results section of my thesis. Several hours of staring at computer printouts of statistical data failed to inspire me but left me with an awful headache. In

a desperate act of self-deception, I scribbled a few notes, threw my mostly blank notepad into my canvas briefcase and walked down to the Varsity Restaurant, where I consoled myself with a large taco salad and a frozen yogurt shake; comfort food for the twenty-first century. Driving home, I resolved to get up early the next morning and work until I completed the results chapter. After all, I had done all the hard parts: developed the proposal, conducted the interviews, and analyzed the data. All that remained was to put the damn thing down on paper, which was no big deal.

By the time I reached my apartment building I felt better. My frustration had subsided and my confidence was restored.

Self-deception used sparingly is a marvelous psychic tonic.

I heard my telephone ringing as I reached the top of the landing. I hurried down the corridor, fumbled for my key ring, found the key to the apartment, and quickly unlocked the door. I pushed open the door and rushed to the kitchen.

As I reached for the handset, the ringing stopped.

I stood next to the kitchen counter, listening to the dial tone, and tried to guess who had called. It might have been my mother, calling to tell me that I needed to make contact with my sister, but actually intending to remind me that I hadn't written or called her (my mother) often enough. Or it could have been Ollie, anxious to tell me she couldn't stand being without me for another moment. Probably not her, I thought, conjuring up a pleasing mental image of the two of us locked in a passionate embrace.

Maybe it was Professor Singleton, checking in to see if his subtle, guilt-inducing strategy had motivated me to do some work on my thesis.

Glancing at my Casio I saw that it was a few minutes after nine P.M. Most likely the person on the other end of the line had been Dr. Barker, calling to let me know the outcome of his conversation with his clients, the parents of the accused boy.

There was an easy way to find out who had called, but I was reluctant to use it.

After several moments of futile guessing I conceded that my clairvoyant powers were not up to the task of identifying the caller I had missed. I punched in the seven familiar numbers and held the telephone

## Hammond's Choice

receiver away from my ear.

Not far enough. The hacking cough grated on my ear, making me wince. "Good evening, this is Mr. Fenton's service," Mrs. D managed to blurt out before breaking into another coughing jag.

Mrs. D was one of the premier operators for the We-Care Answering Service. Several times I had been on the verge of terminating my relationship with We-Care, but my intense dislike of answering machines and the need to be accessible to the few people who actually wanted to contact me had kept me from dropping their service.

"Good evening, Mrs. D," I said politely, hoping I would not trigger another coughing spell. "How are you feeling, today?"

"Oh, Mr. Fenton, you're such a nice man, always concerned about the welfare of your operators. I wish some of our other clients were half as considerate as you. I suppose you would like to know who left messages for you, today."

"That would be nice, Mrs. D."

"Let me see. I had your stack here a moment ago. Someone called for you just before you checked in."

I could hear her cough in the background as she searched for my messages. I had never been to the We-Care office—I was afraid that I might become too attached if I actually saw the operators—but I imagined a dingy room with peeling plaster and a single naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling. In my fantasy the operator on duty sat in an old swivel chair with a small, round back, facing a large old fashioned telephone console complete with head sets and patch cords. Mrs. D and the other operators sat waist deep in a pile of pink telephone message slips. The old messages were never thrown out. They were simply covered over by the next day's batch.

It was a wonder they ever found a message.

"Okay, I think I have all of them," she said, struggling to catch her breath. "Oh my goodness, how disappointing. That nice woman, Mrs. Fenton, your mother, didn't call today."

One thing I could say in their favor was that the We-Care operators definitely took a personal interest in their work. Once Mrs. O, whose telephone voice bore a faint resemblance to Marilyn Monroe with a cheek full of chewing tobacco, began to weep when she told me that Ollie had

called to say she had to work late and could not meet me for dinner.

“What are my messages, Mrs. D?”

“Oh, you only have one message, Mrs. Fenton. A Mr . . . excuse me, Dr. Barker called. He left a number and said you can call him any time before midnight.”

I thanked Mrs. D and was about to hang up when she gasped my name between two coughs that may have registered on the Richter scale.

“Ms. Tolliver also called . . .”

“I thought you said there was only one message,” I said, feeling slightly annoyed at her carelessness.

“There was,” she replied. “Ms. Tolliver said there was no message, that she would call you later.”

Dr. Barker answered on the second ring. He told me he had talked with the parents of the boy accused of killing another resident of the treatment center. He must have done a good job of promoting me. The parents, Ruth and Larry Hammond, wanted to meet with me as soon as possible. They asked Dr. Barker to have me call them that night. I thanked the professor and told him I would keep in touch.

Larry Hammond answered the telephone. He had a deep, resonant voice, one of those Midwestern announcer voices that I associated with movie newsreels and documentary films. It wasn't until later, when I got to know Larry Hammond, that I was able to detect the trace of sadness in his voice. One had to listen closely to hear it, but it was always there.

After listening to how grateful Hammond was that I had agreed to help them, I asked when we could discuss his son's problem. We agreed to meet the next day for breakfast at the Hammonds' home in Liverpool.

I dialed Ollie's number, hoping she was not at the University's sculpture studio where she spent a couple of evenings a week. Although she had a master's degree in fine arts, the closest she had come to finding a position in her field was at the gift shop of the Everson Museum. Manager of the gift shop was not exactly what Ollie had in mind when she set out from the academy, sheepskin in one hand, sculpture tools in the other, ready to dazzle the world of art with her knowledge and talent. The only thing that kept her at the Everson—besides the meager salary that allowed her to pay the rent on her apartment—was the faint hope that Dr. Halverman or Mrs. Wonderby, the museum's assistant curators,

## Hammond's Choice

might finally retire, giving her a shot at a legitimate art job. Everyone I spoke to who knew anything about art told me Ollie was brilliant, that she had learned more about the fine arts in her dozen years of involvement than the two incumbents had acquired in their combined experience of more than seventy-five years.

Unfortunately the two elderly assistant curators gave no indication of retiring and Ollie was too nice to imagine an alternative way they might vacate their positions. So Ollie toiled patiently in the gift shop during the day and spent her evenings creating graceful forms from large blocks of wood and stone.

That is, when she wasn't working out in preparation for an out-of-town bodybuilding competition. In addition to her other noteworthy attributes, Ollie had an incredible body. Not one of those over-developed, muscle-bound physiques you sometimes see on television, but a taut, athletic body with just enough muscle definition to dissuade anyone who might consider kicking sand in her direction.

Ollie defied the stereotype of a female bodybuilder in other ways also. She was quite modest. Not only did she go to great lengths to conceal her well-endowed physique, she also refused to compete in any competition within a hundred miles of Syracuse. When she did compete, it took considerable coaxing and cajoling to find out how she placed, even though she often did well.

After a half dozen rings, I concluded that she wasn't home. As I hung up the receiver, I congratulated myself for reacting so calmly. A year ago I would have been upset that Ollie wasn't waiting with great anticipation for me. My imagination would have conjured up a host of vivid scenarios; in each, Ollie would be intensely engaged with a tall handsome man. And they weren't discussing sculpture.

Now, however, I was able to accept the fact that Ollie was not at home without punishing myself with fantasies of her with other men. Our relationship had come a long way since last year and I felt good about that. I'm not suggesting that things were perfect, but they were much better.

So much better that I only had to complete one crossword puzzle before I was able to suppress the impulse to jump into my car and drive to the sculpture studio.

Liverpool is noted for several things: Heid's Hot Dogs, the huge General Electric plant that has employed thousands of central New Yorkers for many generations and the fact that it bears the same name as the seaport city in western England that was the home of the Beatles. It also has the reputation of being a fairly convenient, though dull, suburb located less than a ten minute drive from the heart of downtown Syracuse.

The Hammonds lived in a nineteen-fifties brick ranch on a quiet cul-de-sac of almost identical houses. I parked my Honda on the street and thanked it for completing another trip, short as it was, without breaking down. Walking on the flagstone path leading to their front door, I tried to imagine how such a wholesome looking environment could spawn a young boy capable of murdering another child.

Larry Hammond greeted me with a tight-lipped smile that looked as if it had taken a lot of energy to produce. He was a heavysset man with a full head of thick black hair and bushy eyebrows that came together above his nose. He wore a dark brown suit, a white broadcloth shirt, and a nineties tie with a bright floral pattern.

"Thank you for coming out on such short notice," he said, shaking my hand firmly. "Can I get you a cup of coffee or some juice?"

I declined his offer and he led me into a small living room filled with early American furniture. Ruth Hammond, a petite black-haired woman who appeared to be in her early forties, sat in the middle of a brown tweed high-backed sofa. She was dressed in a long-sleeved navy blue dress with a maroon silk scarf draped over her shoulders. In her lap she held a large green photo album. The album was open and she appeared to be running her fingers in a circular motion over one of the photographs.

I held out my hand as I approached her. Without rising, she took it and said she was pleased to meet me. I tried to make eye contact with her but she kept her eyes down, looking at the photo album.

"Is that your son?" I asked.

She looked up and seemed startled to see me. "Yes, that's Tommy when he was much younger." She handed the album to me. There were four pictures on the page, each featuring a small dark-haired boy. In one picture he sat in a high chair, his face covered with icing from a piece of cake, the remains of which appear to have been used to decorate the

## Hammond's Choice

tray of his chair. There was a picture of him sitting in his mother's lap playing patty cake. And another showed his father bent over helping him to navigate his tricycle. In the last picture he was by himself dressed in a little sailor suit. I'm not good at estimating children's ages, but I would guess that those photos were taken when he was between the ages of one and three. In all of the photos he had the same crooked smile and it was obvious from their expressions that his parents adored him.

"Cute little boy," I remarked. No response.

"I understand you need someone to do some investigating," I said, trying to ease the tension—my tension, at least.

"To say that we need someone to investigate might be an understatement," Larry Hammond said, with his forced smile. "We're actually pretty desperate at this point." He gestured for me to sit in a wing chair opposite the sofa. He sat next to his wife. For a big man, Hammond moved gracefully. I guessed that he had been an athlete in his youth. "Dr. Barker tells me he explained our problem to you," Mr. Hammond said.

"That's right," I said. "I'm sorry to have to meet you under such disturbing circumstances, but I'm going to do my best to help you. When was the last time you spoke to your son?"

The Hammonds looked at each other. This time it was Mrs. Hammond who spoke. "I guess Dr. Barker didn't tell you everything." She wrung her hands as she spoke. "Tommy is a very disturbed boy. He's had serious emotional problems since he was a small child. In the beginning we thought he was just overactive, but—"

"Ruth is being kind," Larry interjected. "She knew that his outbursts were not normal long before I was willing to admit it."

"Let's not replay history," Ruth said. There was an edge to her voice that surprised me considering her husband had just acknowledged that she knew something was wrong with Tommy long before he was willing to accept that his son had a problem.

Larry closed his eyes for an instant, then proceeded to tell me about Tommy's behavior as a young child. In a detached, almost clinical manner, he described Tommy's sudden transformation from a docile little boy playing with his toys to a wild animal, flailing and screaming, froth forming at the corners of his mouth as he tore up books and threw model cars against the wall.

Or even worse.

"I had just returned from a business trip," Larry said. "It had been a tough trip, but a good one. This was when I still made an honest living as an electrical engineer at GE. Before they kicked me upstairs to a management position. We were bidding on a big military contract—I think it was the Navy—and I had been sent to St. Louis to work with some of our people there on the technical details of the proposal. It was a real killer. We had three days to put the whole thing together and we worked our tails off to meet the deadline. Even pulled an all-nighter, like we used to at college—"

"Mr. Fenton isn't interested in your autobiography, Larry," Ruth said, shaking her head slowly.

Larry glanced at her and for an instant seemed as if he was going to say something, but then turned back to me and continued his story.

"Tommy was seven at the time. He didn't like it when I went away, but on this particular occasion he hadn't given Ruth a hard time and seemed happy to see me. I gave him the little present I had picked up for him at the airport and played with him for a few minutes. Then we sat down to eat dinner."

Ruth shifted in her seat, turning away from Larry and toward the window. I couldn't tell if this was an attempt to shut out a painful memory or another expression of her irritation with Larry. The undercurrent of tension between the two of them was making me uncomfortable.

"We were all pretty hungry," Larry continued. "We ate quickly and did not talk. After a few minutes I asked Tommy to tell me about his school project. Tommy did not respond, but kept on eating. Ruth, who was sitting next to Tommy, tapped him on the shoulder and asked him again to tell me what he was doing.

"Suddenly Tommy leaped out of his chair and lunged at Ruth. He put his hands around her throat and started to choke her. It happened so quickly that neither of us was prepared. Ruth started to scream and I sat frozen in my seat, too stunned to react. It seemed unreal, as if I were watching a three-dimensional film projected onto our dining room table.

"Finally I came to my senses and tried to pull Tommy off Ruth. She had fallen from her chair and they were both on the ground. I reached

## Hammond's Choice

down, put my hand on Tommy's shoulder and shook him, but he didn't let go. Then I grabbed him by the upper arm and tugged. He still didn't budge. By this time Ruth was turning red. Her calls for help came out as hissing whispers. I reached under Tommy's arms and pulled as hard as I could, but still could not get him to release his grip. I couldn't believe how strong he was. He couldn't have weighed more than fifty pounds but he seemed to have the strength of a two-hundred pound man.

"I started to feel my own strength fade and began to panic. What if I couldn't get Tommy off? Would he actually strangle Ruth? How could this be happening? I felt nauseated but knew I couldn't waste even a few seconds. Finally I grabbed Tommy by his tiny wrists, and with all my remaining strength, managed to pry his fingers loose. I yanked him backward and we landed on the floor, Tommy on his back, on top of me, swinging his arms and kicking his legs wildly while I lay there gasping for air, my arms wrapped around his waist holding on for dear life."

Larry was breathing heavily, as if he were reliving the awful scene he was describing. Ruth started at the wall, moving her head back and forth slowly. There were tears in her eyes.

Larry took a deep breath and exhaled. "I'll never forget that night. I'd never seen Tommy act like that and I was totally unprepared. For a moment I thought he was really going to kill Ruth and I wasn't going to be able to stop him. The whole thing didn't make sense to me. This was my son, my seven-year-old, fifty-pound little boy. What was he doing kneeling on my wife's chest, screaming like a primitive beast as he tried to strangle her? Why couldn't I—a two-hundred pound man—stop him?"

I was about to say something reassuring, how it would be difficult to respond effectively since Tommy's attack was so unexpected—even social psychologists know a little about empathy—when Ruth bolted out of her seat, shouting. "That's enough, Larry, enough. Please stop it, now." She strode to where Larry was sitting and put a hand on his shoulder. He bowed his head and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to hold back the tears. Ruth stroked the back of his neck gently and Larry let go and began to cry quietly.

After a moment Larry stopped crying and regained his composure. Ruth continued to stand beside his chair as he told me about their experiences with Tommy following his attack on Ruth. He described how

Tommy's aggressive behavior had escalated, both at home and at school, including one incident where his third grade teacher called them in for a conference. A little girl who sat in front of Tommy had reported that he had threatened to gouge out her eyes if she didn't give her pencil to him. As he got older, his outbursts (and their fear) grew worse.

Larry also recounted their attempts to find help. At first, they sought advice and counseling from a succession of psychologists and psychiatrists in the community. While a few professionals, including Dr. Barker, seemed genuinely interested in trying to help, none of their efforts seemed to have a positive impact on Tommy's behavior. On several occasions his behavior actually deteriorated during treatment. To make matters worse many therapists made Ruth and Larry feel as if they were responsible for Tommy's problems. Sometimes the message was quite clear and explicit: They had not set firm limits for him as a young child, children always act out the conflicts that exist between their parents, therefore the Hammonds must have some unresolved marital problems. With other therapists, the guilt was induced more subtly and painfully, cloaked in a soft sheath of concerned questions and sympathetic gestures. Behind these expressions of concern lurked a sharp-edged judgment of attribution and blame which made them feel even worse.

After awhile, beaten down by frustration and guilt, they turned from the solo practitioners to agencies that supposedly had "programs" for children like Tommy. They went to mental health centers and family service agencies, made application to the special education program at the school and even tried to enroll Tommy in a day treatment program run by the child psychiatry division at the medical school. All to no avail. Either Tommy was not eligible for the program (the school psychologist told them his behavior didn't interfere with his educational functioning since he was receiving passing grades) or they had a long waiting list, or the agency decided his problems did not fall under their jurisdiction and suggested the Hammonds try agency X or Y or Z.

After awhile Tommy's outbursts became more explosive. Ruth was afraid to be alone with him and Larry cringed when she called him at work, dreading that Tommy had done something awful at school. One rainy day in April, when Tommy was ten, the dreaded call actually came. A little boy who had recently transferred from another school made

## Hammond's Choice

the mistake of teasing Tommy. Without any warning, Tommy attacked the boy, knocking him to the ground and clawing at his face. When the teacher, a wispy middle-aged woman, tried to intervene, Tommy kicked her in the leg and ran out of the building into the street, where the burly vice-principal managed to tackle him.

The little boy required eleven stitches to close a deep gash on his face and the teacher's bruised shin caused her to miss two days of school. Tommy was suspended for ten days, and the school agreed not to press charges against Tommy only after the Hammonds promised to place him in the local private psychiatric hospital.

"If I knew then what I know now," Larry said, "I would have skipped all of those extra steps—and expenses—and gone directly to court. Tommy stayed in the hospital for twenty-eight days. He was released on the day my insurance benefits ran out. When he came home he was no different from when he went in, except that he was mad at us for putting him in the hospital.

"In the next year, he was admitted to hospitals twice more, the second time to the state hospital because we had no more insurance and had just about depleted our savings paying for his treatment."

"And none of it helped him at all," Ruth said angrily. "The therapists did a good job of making us feel guilty, but that's about it."

Larry nodded in agreement. "The only decent advice we got was from a tough, old social worker at the state hospital. She took us aside after one of those frustrating treatment meetings in which everyone agreed that Tommy's problems were serious, but no one had any practical ideas about what to do, short of sending him off to a residential treatment center for a couple of years.

"Neither Ruth nor I was prepared for that. It wasn't that we weren't ready emotionally. We were so desperate at that point we would have taken him to Lourdes if someone told us it might help Tommy. No, it was the money. Even the least expensive treatment center cost fifty to sixty thousand a year, which was a bargain compared to the big name places. Because of my income, we weren't eligible for any public assistance and there was no way we could afford to pay that kind of money."

"What about the schools?" I asked. "They couldn't possibly deny that his problems weren't interfering with his education, especially since they

suspended him from school.”

Larry smiled at me wistfully and I immediately felt like a fool. “We requested help, even went through a due process hearing where our request for residential treatment tuition assistance was denied. The school system argued they could meet his needs in a self-contained special education class within the regular school. Apparently their lawyers knew more about the laws than our lawyer. We lost the appeal.”

I thought about the irony of the school telling the Hammonds they needed to put Tommy in a psychiatric hospital while at the same time claiming his educational needs could be met within a regular school. I decided not to say anything about this paradox. The Hammonds certainly didn’t need to be reminded of how unfair the system was. “You were saying something about a social worker at the state hospital,” I said.

“Oh, yes,” Larry said. “I lost my train of thought. Seems to happen a lot lately. This woman—I think her name was Handler or Horner—”

“Handler,” Ruth interjected. “Her name was Joan Handler. I’ll never forget her name . . . or that day.”

“That’s right, Joan Handler,” Larry said. “She wasn’t exactly a warm and fuzzy type. But she was a straight shooter. She told us we were wasting our time. Tommy wasn’t going to get the help he needed at the state hospital and none of the other agencies was going to shell out the money needed to get him the treatment he needed. She told us there was only one way Tommy could get the kind of treatment he needed, but the price would be very high.”

I was confused. “I thought you had exhausted all of your savings?”

“Not that kind of price,” Larry said, twisting his mouth into a joyless grin.

Once again, Ruth’s anger broke through. This time it was directed at her husband. “For God’s sake, Larry, do you have to drag it out? You act like this is some kind of suspense story! Well, it’s not. When you close the book, nothing changes. We’re still stuck with our miserable life. And Tommy is in big trouble.”

Larry’s face turned red. For a second he looked as if he was going to respond, but instead he took a deep breath, expelled it through his closed lips and continued. I noticed that Ruth made no effort to tell her version of what had happened, and Larry didn’t encourage her to improve on his

## Hammond's Choice

performance.

"The county social service department had a special fund for seriously disturbed kids," Larry said in a monotone. "Kids like Tommy. They were able to purchase intensive residential treatment for these kids if it could be demonstrated that no other services were suitable. The only catch was that funding was limited and they had to establish priorities for who would receive these services. Because the money was provided by the state, their highest priority—in fact, their only priority—was that the money be used for children who were wards of the state."

"So Tommy wasn't eligible?" I asked.

"That was our first reaction, too," Larry responded. "But the social worker told us his problems were so serious that they might be willing to support placement in a residential treatment center if we were willing to give up custody of Tommy and allow the social services department to become his legal guardians."

"That's absurd," I blurted out, stepping out of my professional investigator fact-finding role. "How could they make you give up custody of your own son?"

This time Ruth responded. Her anger had been replaced by sadness, a deep chasm of sadness that threatened to swallow her voice if not her entire being. "They didn't force us," she said in little more than a whisper. I had to lean forward to hear her. The photo album was still open to the boy with the crooked smile and his doting parents. "They gave us a choice. We could keep our son and watch him continue to deteriorate, or we could give up custody of our only son so the state could put him a place that might be able to help him."

There was no need for me to ask which alternative they had chosen.