

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Silent Treatment

Michael Palmer

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## About the Book

Dr Harry Corbett is on his way to hospital, to visit his estranged wife, Evie, who is scheduled for surgery the next day. He hopes it will be a quiet evening of reconciliation - in recent weeks Evie, never quick to share her feelings, has been more closed and distant than ever.

But Harry arrives to find her dead in her hospital bed. The police are treating it as murder, and Corbett is their only suspect ...

Harry is unprepared for the stunning revelations that follow. Leading a double life, his beautiful wife had uncovered a deadly secret - a secret someone else wanted to keep quiet.

Medically sophisticated, coolly arrogant, moving undetected through a busy urban hospital, it is clear to Harry that the killer can only be a doctor. But can Harry stop him in his tracks before any more patients receive his lethal silent treatment?

## About the Author

Michael Palmer, M.D., is the author of seventeen novels and has been translated into twenty-six languages. He trained in internal medicine at Boston City and Massachusetts General Hospitals, spent twenty years as a full-time practitioner of internal and emergency medicine, and is now involved in the treatment of alcoholism and chemical dependence. He lives in Massachusetts.

*Also by Michael Palmer*

The Sisterhood  
Side Effects  
Flashback  
Extreme Measures  
Natural Causes  
Critical Judgement  
Miracle Cure  
The Patient  
Fatal  
The Society  
The Fifth Vial  
The First Patient  
The Second Opinion  
The Last Surgeon  
A Heartbeat Away  
Oath of Office

# Silent Treatment

Michael Palmer



*For a decade of sharing her patience, understanding,  
friendship, gentle humor, wisdom, prodding, and faith with  
me, this book is dedicated to*

*Beverly Lewis  
Senior Editor  
Bantam Books*

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M.S.P.

# Silent Treatment

‘THE DOCTOR WILL see you now.’

The moment Ray Santana heard Orsino say the words, he knew he was going to die, and die horribly.

Ten hours or so had passed since his adhesive tape blindfold had been ripped away. Ten hours of being gagged and lashed to a high-backed chair – his head and chin taped so tightly, so expertly, that he could not move at all. Ten hours of listening to the mariachi bands and singers in the street above and knowing that for all the good they would do him, the revelers might as well be celebrating their Fiesta de Nogales on Mars. Ten hours without seeing any movement except the comings and goings of a huge roach.

The roach was an inch and a half long. Maybe two. It padded out of a crack in the mildewed basement wall and made its way, in no particular hurry, to the floor. Ray followed the insect with his eyes until it left his field of vision, and waited for its return. For a time, he wondered about roaches – how they had sex, whether they chose one mate for life. For a time, he pictured his own family – Eliza singing as she whipped together her incredible paella . . . Ray Jr. diving headfirst into third. For a time he thought about his life before Eliza – the Road Warriors, the drugs . . . his decision to leave the gang and try college . . . the irony of his ending up as an undercover agent for the DEA.

Now, after ten meticulously careful years on the job, he was about to meet The Doctor. And soon – very soon, he suspected – he would be dead.

For no reason that he could understand, things had blown completely apart. The end of nearly three years of work was

at hand, and it was time to put together federal indictments and call in the troops. His cover was as deep, as airtight as it had ever been. The meeting to turn his evidence over to Sean Garvey from the home office had been set up with Priority One precautions – four hours of steady movement, half a dozen decoys and back-checkers, and a route along which it was impossible to be followed. But suddenly, Alacante’s men were all over them. And in seconds, just like that, it was over. Not one shot in defense, not one punch. Just . . . over. Garvey had been hauled away to God only knew where, and Ray had been blindfolded, crammed in the trunk of a Mercedes, and driven back into town. After an hour, he was dragged to the cellar of a house and then through a long, damp tunnel to this basement.

Ray wondered if The Doctor had already been to see Garvey.

Ol’ Garves might hold off for a little while in naming names, Ray figured. But underneath his slick veneer, he was a wimp. The first sight of his own blood, the first hit of real pain – the electric cattle prod or knife or vise or whatever the hell they used – and he would be spilling his guts. He would give up every fucking name he could think of, believing in his heart of hearts that if he didn’t cause Alacante’s people too much trouble, they might let him live. Wrong!

‘. . . Tijuana? . . . Oh, that would be a guy named Gonzales. He’s had a little fruit stand downtown for the past three years, but he’s really a U.S. Fed . . . Vera Cruz? Yeah, I know that guy, too . . .’

*Shit, Garves, I’m sorry, Santana thought suddenly. I understand . . . What the hell. I’m a field man. You’re a suit. I can sit here like King Tut, thinking you’re trash for giving in to them. But they haven’t touched me yet. Besides, you don’t know a tenth of what I do about the Mexican undercover organization. And I don’t plan on telling that part no matter what. My goddamn initiation into the Road*

*Warriors was worse than anything these creeps can do to me here, for chrissakes. Just do your best, Garves. Just do your best. Try not to make it too easy for them.*

Another half hour passed. Possibly longer. Santana closed his eyes and wished he could just will himself dead. Or at least asleep. The air in the basement was stagnant and heavy with mold. Sucking it in through his nostrils took so much effort that sleep was impossible. How ironic. After three years, he had amassed enough information for several dozen major indictments. His only real failure was not pinpointing the famous Alacante Pipeline - the tunnel connecting one or more houses in Nogales, Arizona, with counterparts in Nogales, Mexico. Now, unless he was sorely mistaken, he had not only found the Pipeline, he had actually been dragged through it. Eliza was right, as usual. He should have gotten out while he could - started up the landscaping business he was always talking about, and left the heroics to the crazies. Now . . .

There was a scraping noise behind him - a portion of the wall was being swung aside. Seconds later, Orsino came into view. An Alacante lieutenant and a remorseless killer, Orsino had survived a shotgun blast that had left him without half of his lower lip and jaw. What remained of his mouth was all on the right side of his face. Ray wondered if perhaps Orsino liked it that way.

'It is time,' he growled, with the inflated pride of a small man thrust into the company of a legend. 'Time for you to meet The Doctor.'

An average-looking man in his early forties, medium height, stepped forward. His face was remarkable only for how completely *unremarkable* it was. Not handsome, but not unattractive. No unusual features. No tics. No scars. Brown hair cut short. Hairline not receding. No glasses. He was wheeling a stainless steel cart on top of which was a tattered leather valise. His back was turned to Ray as he flipped the suitcase open.

Ray's knuckles blanched as he clutched the arm of the chair.

'My name is Perchek. Dr. Anton Perchek,' the man said.

Santana's stomach tightened. Bile shot up into his throat. The name was a death sentence. *The Doctor*. Everyone in the agency - everyone in Washington - knew who Perchek was. But as far as Ray knew, no one had ever seen so much as a photograph of him.

'I can tell from your expression that my name is one you recognize,' Perchek said, favoring Ray with an enigmatic smile. 'That's good. That's very good.'

Ray's mouth had gone dry. Anton Perchek, M.D., Soviet-born and trained, had long ago left his native country. Now, he belonged to no country and to every country. A true son of the world. For over the years, The Doctor had built a reputation for being the best in the world at what he did, which was to keep torture subjects alive, awake, and responsive. He was seldom without employment. Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Paraguay, Iraq, South Africa, Haiti - wherever there was conflict or political repression, there was a demand for his services. There were even rumors - unsubstantiated - that he did occasional jobs for the CIA. A U.S. federal grand jury had indicted Perchek in absentia for complicity in the deaths of several American undercover operatives, two of whom Ray knew well.

'So, Señor Santana,' he said, his Spanish unaccented but sterile. 'Would you prefer I address you in English?' He waited for a response. Then he turned and noticed the adhesive tape pulled tightly across Ray's mouth. He chuckled at his own oversight. 'My apologies, Señor Santana. Señor Orsino?'

His half mouth twisted in what might have been a grin, Orsino stepped forward and viciously tore the tape off - first from across Ray's face, then from under his chin.

'So,' Perchek asked again. 'Spanish or English? What will it be?'

Ray flexed the tightness and spasm out of his jaw.

'Your Spanish is better than mine,' he said.

'I've been led to believe your Mexican Spanish is quite good, actually - especially for someone from the Bronx. But very well. English it will be.'

His English, with perhaps the slightest British tinge, was no less fluent than his Spanish. Ray suspected that the man could have conversed in any number of languages.

'I speak twelve others, actually,' he said, as if reading Santana's mind. 'Although my Arabic and Swahili may be getting a bit rusty.'

His average face smiled down at Ray. But in that moment, Ray noticed something that wasn't the least bit average. It was the man's eyes. The irises were as pale as any he had ever seen - almost translucent. *Ice blue* was the closest he could come to labeling them. In fact, ice blue was a near perfect description, for they were as hard and as cold as a human's eyes could be.

'I don't know what this is all about.' Ray forced out the words.

The ice-blue eyes sparked. Otherwise, Perchek's demeanor remained unchanged.

'Then we shall help you learn,' he said.

He handed Orsino a length of twine and motioned to the light fixture overhead. Once the twine was secured and dangling down, Perchek turned to his valise. He produced a plastic bottle of intravenous solution, connected it to a plastic infusion tube, and suspended it from the twine.

'Zero point nine percent sodium chloride,' he said, pulling on a pair of rubber gloves. 'Normal saline.'

He tightened a latex tourniquet just above Santana's left elbow, waited a few seconds for the veins to distend, and then slipped in an intravenous catheter with the ease of one who had performed the maneuver hundreds of times. Next he wrapped a blood pressure cuff around the other arm and secured it in place.

'Listen to me,' Ray said, struggling for a tone of calm and reason. 'Orsino, you've got to listen. I was setting up that Fed, Garvey. He was about to sell me some information on the new DEA strategy against Alacante.'

'You are lying,' Orsino said.

'No, it's the truth.'

'We shall see what is the truth and what is not,' Perchek said, drawing up a slightly turbid solution into a large syringe. He inserted the long needle through a rubber port into the infusion tubing, and taped the syringe to Ray's forearm. 'We shall see very soon. Mr. Orsino?'

Orsino knelt, positioning himself so that his face was just a foot or so from Ray's. Santana mentally recoiled from the man's breath, heavy with the odor of cigarettes and garlic, and stared with revulsion at the yellowed half rows of teeth.

'Names,' Orsino said, a small bubble of spittle forming at the good side of his mouth. 'The Mexican undercover agents. All of them.'

Ray looked past the man to where Perchek stood. He wondered what awaited him within the tattered valise. Truth serum, perhaps. Reputedly, Perchek usually left the dirty work to his employers. His job was to use his drugs to keep subjects alive and awake. But it seemed hard to believe the crass, slow-witted Orsino would have the patience and skill required to do an effective job of inflicting just the right increments of pain.

'I don't know any of them, Orsino,' Ray said. 'You've got to believe that.'

During his year of training with the agency, there were a number of classes the cadets had shared with their CIA counterparts. One of them was formally entitled Dealing with Hostile Interrogation. The trainees referred to it as Torture 101. The instructor, a former fighter pilot named Joe Dash, had spent four years in a Vietcong prison camp. He had no eyes.

*'There are three things you must always believe when being hostilely interrogated,'* Dash stressed. He believed that there were always three points essential to any subject. Three - no more, no less. *'First, that anything you are promised in exchange for answers is bullshit. Second, that if you don't give them what they want, they may decide to hold off killing you and try again another day. And third, and most important, that as long as you are alive, there's a chance you'll be rescued.'*

'We want those names,' Orsino said.

'I swear, I don't know any of them. You've got to believe me.'

*'There are three stages you should go through in responding to hostile interrogation. Each stage should be dragged out as long as humanly possible. First, deny knowing anything. And keep denying it. Next, admit that you know some things but give them misinformation - especially if they'll have to spend time verifying what you say. The longer it takes them to determine you're lying, the better the chance that you'll be rescued - take it from one who was. The third stage is telling them what they want to know. Whether you are forced to that stage or not depends a little on what you're made of and a lot on how good your interrogators are.'*

Orsino reached out a meaty hand and squeezed Ray's cheeks so tightly their insides touched.

'I'm glad you didn't tell us,' he rasped.

He stepped back. Immediately, Ray was transfixed by the ice blue eyes.

'Do you know any chemistry at all, Mr. Santana?' Perchek asked. 'No matter. You may be interested to know the chemical name for the contents of that syringe. It is four-chloryl, four-hydroxy, trimethyl, six-fluorodimethyl carbamate. Actually, there are two chemical side chains as well, so the name is even longer.'

'I'm impressed,' Ray said.

'The short chemical name is hyconidol hydrochloride. A chemist friend did the synthesis, but my own research produced the concept.'

'Bravo.'

'You see, Mr. Santana, at the end of every pain nerve in the human body is a chemical transmitter that connects it with the next nerve and fires it off. The impulse shoots up that nerve, and another jet of transmitter connects it with the next. Et cetera, et cetera. Eventually - quite rapidly, actually - the message is transmitted from the point of injury to the pain center of the brain and . . . ouch!'

'Nicely put.'

Santana already knew where Perchek was heading. He was sure his understanding showed in his eyes.

'Hyconidol almost matches, atom for atom, the pain fiber neurotransmitter chemical. That means I can fire those nerves off all at once and at will. Every single one of them. Think of it, Mr. Santana. No injury . . . no mess . . . no blood. Just pain. Pure pain. Except in the work I do, hyconidol has absolutely no clinical value. But if we ever do market it, I thought an appropriate name for it might be Agonyl. It's incredible stuff, if I do say so myself. A small injection? A little tingle. A larger one? Well, I'm sure you get the picture.'

Ray's mouth had become desert dry. The pounding within his chest was so forceful that he felt certain The Doctor could see it.

*Please don't do this*, he screamed silently. *Please . . .*

Perchek's thumb tightened on the plunger.

'I think we'll start with something modest,' he said. 'Equivalent, perhaps, to nothing more than a little cool breeze over the cavities in your teeth.'

The last voice Ray heard before the injection was Joe Dash's.

*There are three ways a man can choose to handle dying . . .*

6 Years Later

FOR TWELVE YEARS, the Jade Dragon on the Upper West Side of Manhattan had prided itself on exceptional food at very reasonable prices. As a result, on an average weekday its 175-seat capacity turned over twice, and on weekends as many as five times. Tonight, a warm Friday in June, the wait for a table was half an hour.

Seated in his customary spot, Ron Farrell was commenting to his wife Susan and their friends Jack and Anita Harmon on how the place had grown since he and Susan had first eaten there almost a decade ago. Now, although they had moved three times, they made a point of coming to the Jade Dragon alone or with friends every other Friday, almost like clockwork.

They were nearly done with a meal that the Harmons had proclaimed as good as any Chinese food they had ever eaten when Ron stopped in mid-sentence and began rubbing his abdomen. With no warning, severe cramps had begun knotting his gut, accompanied almost immediately by waves of nausea. He felt sweat break out beneath his arms and over his face. His vision blurred.

‘Ronnie? Are you all right?’ his wife asked.

Farrell took several slow, deep breaths. He had always handled pain well. But this ache seemed to be worsening.

‘I don’t feel well,’ he managed. ‘I’ve . . . I’ve just gotten this pain, right here.’

‘It couldn’t be what you ate,’ Susan said. ‘We all shared the same —’

Susan’s face suddenly went ashen. Beads of perspiration sprang out across her forehead. Then, without another word,

she lurched sideways and vomited on the floor.

Standing by the kitchen door of the crowded restaurant, the young assistant chef watched the commotion grow as one by one, the four customers at table 11 became violently ill. Finally, he reentered the massive kitchen and made his way nonchalantly to the pay phone installed for the use of the hired help. The number he dialed was handwritten on a three-by-five file card.

'Yes?' the man's voice at the other end said.

'Xia Wei Zen here.'

'Yes?'

The chef read carefully the words printed on the card.

'There are four leaves on the clover.'

'Very good. You know where to go after your shift. The man in the black car will take the empty vial from you in exchange for the rest of what you are now owed.'

The man hung up without waiting for a reply.

Xia Wei Zen glanced about to ensure no one was watching, and then returned to his station. Work would not be nearly so taxing for the rest of his shift. For one thing, there was a good deal of money awaiting him. And for another, there would be many fewer orders coming in from the dining room tonight.

The call came into the emergency room of Good Samaritan Hospital at 9:47. Four Priority Two patients were being transported by rescue squad from a Chinese restaurant twenty blocks away. Preliminary diagnosis was acute food poisoning.

*Priority Two.* Potentially serious illness or injury, non-life-threatening at the moment.

It was a typically busy Friday night. The nurses and residents of the large teaching hospital were already three hours behind. The twenty available treatment rooms were full, as was the waiting room. The air was heavy with the odors of perspiration, antiseptic, and blood. All around were

the sounds of illness, misery, and pain - moans, babies crying, uncontrollable coughing.

'Ever eat at a place called the Jade Dragon?' the nurse who took the call from the rescue squad asked.

'I think so,' the charge nurse answered.

'Well, next time you might want to consider Italian. One rescue is on the way in with two probable food poisonings. Two more will be leaving shortly. Altogether, two men, two women, all in their forties, all on IVs, all vomiting.'

'Vital signs?'

'The numbers are okay for the moment. But according to the crew on the scene, none of them are looking all that good.'

'Fun and games times four.'

'Where do you want them?'

'What do we have?'

'Seven can be cleared if you can talk Dr. Grateful Dead, or whatever the hell his name is, into writing a few prescriptions.'

'Perfect. Put whoever looks worst in there and the rest in the hall. We'll move them into rooms as we can. Might as well order routine labs and an EKG on each of them, too.'

'Chop chop.'

Ron Farrell grunted in pain as his litter was set on the emergency bay platform and telescoped up into transport position. He was on his side in a fetal position. The pain boring into his stomach was unremitting. Jack Harmon, who had quickly become even sicker than Susan, had been transported in the ambulance with him. Now, Ron saw him wave weakly as the two of them were wheeled through the automatic doors and into the commotion and fluorescent glare of the intake area.

The minutes that followed were a blur of questions, needles, spasms of pain, and examinations from people dressed in surgical scrubs. Ron was wheeled to a small room

with open shelves of supplies and a suction bottle on the wall. The staff had addressed him courteously enough, but it was clear that everyone was harried. Ron's personal physician wasn't affiliated with Good Samaritan, as far as he knew. There was really nothing he could think of to do except wait for the medication he had been promised to take the pain away.

'You are feeling better, yes?' a man's voice said in a thick foreign accent that Ron could not identify.

Still in the fetal position that gave him the least discomfort, Ron blinked his eyes open, and looked up. The man, dressed in blue surgical scrubs like most of the ER staff, smiled down at him. The overhead light, eclipsed by his head, formed a bright halo around him and darkened his face.

'I am Dr. Kozlansky,' he said. 'It appears you and the others have developed food poisoning.'

'Goddamn Jade Dragon. Is my wife all right?'

'Oh yes. Oh yes, I assure you, she is most fine.'

'Great. Listen, Doc, my stomach's killing me. Can you give me something for this pain?'

'That is exactly why I am here,' he said.

'Wonderful.'

The physician produced a syringe half full of clear liquid and emptied it into the intravenous line.

'Thanks, Doc,' Farrell said.

'You may wish to wait and thank me when . . . when we see how this works.'

'Okay, have it your —'

Farrell was suddenly unable to speak. There was a horrible, consuming emptiness within his chest. And he knew in that moment that his heart had stopped beating.

The man continued smiling down at him benignly.

'You are feeling better, yes?' he asked.

Ron felt his arms and legs begin to shake uncontrollably. His back arched until only his heels and the back of his head

touched the bed. His teeth jackhammered together. Then his consciousness began to fade. His thought became more disjointed. His dreadful fear lessened and then finally vanished. His body dropped lifelessly back on to the bed.

For a full minute the man stood there watching. Then he slipped the syringe into his pocket.

'I'm afraid I must leave you now,' he whispered in a voice free of any accent. 'Please try to get some rest.'

1 Year Later

# Chapter 1

HARRY CORBETT WAS on his fifteenth lap around the indoor track when he first sensed the pain in his chest. The track, a balcony just under an eighth of a mile around, was on the top floor of the Grey Building of the Manhattan Medical Center. Ten feet below it was a modestly equipped gym with weights, the usual machines, heavy bags, and some mats. The fitness center, unique in the city, was exclusively for the hospital staff and employees. It had been created through the legacy of Dr. George Pollock, a cardiologist who had twice swum the English Channel. Pollock's death, at age ninety, had resulted from his falling off a ladder while cleaning the gutters of his country home.

At the moment of his awareness of the pain, Harry was actually thinking about Pollock and about what it would be like to live until ninety. He slowed a bit and rotated his shoulders. The pain persisted. It wasn't much - maybe two on the scale of one to ten that physicians used. But it was there. Reluctant to stop running, Harry swallowed and massaged his upper abdomen. The discomfort was impossible to localize. One moment it seemed to be beneath his breastbone, the next in the middle of his back. He slowed a bit more, down from an eight-minutes-per-mile pace to about ten-and-a-half. The ache was in his left chest now . . . no, it was gone . . . no, not gone, somewhere between his right nipple and clavicle.

He slowed still more. Then, finally, he stopped. He bent forward, his hands on his thighs. It wasn't angina, he told himself. Nothing about the character of the pain said cardiac. He understood his body, and he certainly

understood pain. This pain was no big deal. And if it wasn't his heart, he really didn't give a damn where it was coming from.

Harry knew his logic was flawed – diagnostic deduction he would never, ever apply to a patient. But like most physicians with physical symptoms, his denial was more powerful than any logic.

Steve Josephson, jogging in the opposite direction, lumbered toward him.

'Hey, you okay?' he asked.

Still staring down at the banked corks track, Harry took a deep breath. The pain was gone, just like that. Gone. He waited a few seconds to be sure. Nothing. The smidgen of remaining doubt disappeared. Definitely not the ticker, he told himself again.

'Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine, Steve,' he said. 'You go ahead and finish.'

'Hey, you're the zealot who goaded me into this jogging nonsense in the first place,' Josephson said. 'I'll take any excuse I can get to stop.'

He was sweating more profusely than Harry, although he had probably run half as far. Like Harry, Steve Josephson was a general practitioner – 'family medicine specialists,' the bureaucrats had decided to name them. They were in solo practice, but shared night and weekend coverage with four other GPs. It was just after six-thirty in the morning – earlier than usual for their run. But this would be a busy and important day.

At eight, following morning rounds and an emergency meeting of the family medicine department, the entire MMC staff would be convening in the amphitheater. After months of interviews and investigation, the task force charged with determining whether or not to reduce the privileges of GPs in the hospital was ready to present its findings. From the rumors Harry had tapped into, the recommendations of the

Sidonis committee would be harsh - the professional equivalent of castration.

With a portion of Harry's income and a significant chunk of his professional respect on the line, the impending presentation was reason enough for the ulcers or muscle spasms, or whatever the hell had caused the strange ache. And even the committee report was not the foremost concern on his mind.

'We've been running together three or four times a week for almost a year,' Josephson said, 'and I've never seen you stop before your five miles were up.'

'Well, Stephen, it just goes to show there's a first time for everything.' Harry studied his friend's worried face and softened. 'Listen, pal, I'd tell you if it was anything. Believe me I would. I just don't feel like running today. I've got too much on my mind.'

'I understand. Is Evie going in tomorrow?'

'The day after. Ben Dunleavy's her neurosurgeon. He talks about clipping her cerebral aneurysm as if he was removing a wart or something. But I guess it's what he does.'

They moved off the track as the only other runners in the gym approached.

'How's she holding up?' Josephson asked.

Harry shrugged. 'All things considered, she seems pretty calm about it. But she can be pretty closed in about her feelings.'

*Closed in.* The understatement of the week, Harry mused ruefully. He couldn't recall the last time Evie had shared feelings of any consequence with him.

'Well, tell her Cindy and I wish her well, and that I'll stop by to see her as soon as that berry is clipped.'

'Thanks,' Harry said. 'I'm sure she'll appreciate hearing that.'

In fact, he doubted that she would. As warm, bright, and caring as Steve Josephson was, Evie could never get past his obesity.

‘Did you ever listen to him breathe?’ she had once asked as Harry was extolling his virtues as a physician. ‘I felt like I was trying to converse with a bull in heat. And those white, narrow-strapped tees he wears beneath his white dress shirts – pulleese . . .’

‘So, then,’ Josephson said as they entered the locker room, ‘before we shower, why don’t you tell me what *really* happened out there.’

‘I already—’

‘Harry, I was halfway around the track from you and I could see the color drain from your face.’

‘It was nothing.’

‘You know, I spent years learning how to ask non-leading questions. Don’t make me regress.’

For the purpose of insurance application forms or the occasional prescription, Harry and Josephson served as one another’s physician. And although each persistently urged the other to schedule a complete physical, neither of them had. The closest they had come was an agreement made just after Harry’s forty-ninth birthday. Harry, already obsessive about diet and exercise, had promised to get a checkup and a cardiac stress test. Steve, six years younger but fifty pounds heavier, had agreed to have a physical, start jogging, and join Weight Watchers. But except for Josephson’s grudging sessions on the track, neither had followed through.

‘I had a little indigestion,’ Harry conceded. ‘That’s all. It came. It bothered me for a minute. It left.’

‘Indigestion, huh. By indigestion do you perhaps mean chest pain?’

‘Steve, I’d tell you if I had chest pain. You know I would.’

‘Slight correction. I know you *wouldn’t*. How many men did you lug back to that chopper?’

Although Harry rarely talked about it, over the years almost everyone at the hospital had heard some version of the events at Nha-trang, or had actually composed one