

CHILD'S PLAY

by Amelia L. Rodgers

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E mail:

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Caution: contains adult language

Dedicated to Ed Bishop.

With gratitude to Jon Garfield, who at my request did extensive editing and made suggestions that improved the story considerably.

Also with gratitude to Ed Straker, for letting me into his mind and revealing his innermost thoughts on the subject.

"Alec, I'm getting sick and tired of your interference in my personal life."

"Fine by me Ed, but if you drop from exhaustion...."

"Just because I've put in some extra hours doesn't mean I'm about to drop from exhaustion, Colonel Freeman."

"Look, Ed, go home and get some sleep for God's sake. Minute we get that computer problem fixed, I'll call you."

"Oh, as if I haven't heard that before! Last time I agreed to that, I didn't get a call from you for hours--and then only because everything was already taken care of, and my presence wasn't needed," snapped Ed.

"Well, that isn't good," Alec said.

Ed Straker rubbed the bridge of his nose and looked at Alec.

"What isn't good?"

"I've run out of devious ways to get you to go home and rest. You're on to me now."

Ed fought a grin for a moment, finally swallowed it, and drew his lips into a disapproving line.

"All right. All right. You win, Colonel. But the second we get that problem fixed..." Ed gave Alec a stern look.

"Cross my heart and hope to die." Alec grinned broadly.

"Believe me, Alec, if I get home and fall asleep, and you don't call me, and I find out about it, you'll hope to die all right, because what I'll do to you will be worse than death."

"Go," grinned Alec.

Ed mumbled something and started to pick up his attache case, but Alec put an hand on it, preventing him from taking it. Ed gave him a look that would have melted steel, but Alec just waited. Finally, with a sound akin to a growl, Ed grabbed his jacket and went out.

* * *

A little while later, Paul Foster came into Straker's office and looked at Alec.

"What did you do this time? Threaten to cut out his liver? Say that you'd send an expose on SHADO to the Times? Threaten to give Fifi St. James, the stripper at that club in Soho, his home phone number?" Foster wondered.

"No. Didn't have to," chuckled Alec. He lifted Straker's paperweight and began to roll it around in a satisfied fashion.

"What then? Lieutenant Garfield and I had a bet going. I said you wouldn't get him to leave until 5 am and it's only 4:23 am. I lost a lot of money to Garfield."

"No faith in me, Paul?" laughed Alec.

"Not fifty pounds' worth, no."

"Come on. I'll buy you a coffee." Alec put the paperweight back into its stand.

"Coffee in the cafeteria tastes like Interceptor petrol, and you know it..." Paul argued as the two men left Straker's office and turned a corner.

Alec didn't respond.

"All right, I'll bite. What's worrying you?"

"Paul, sometimes I wonder if I shouldn't put the amnesia drug in his coffee, introduce him to some halfway decent woman, get him married, and be godfather to his children. Let him have a life before it gets too late."

"He wouldn't be Straker, then. This was his choice, and you know it. SHADO wouldn't be SHADO without him."

"He's getting older, you know. He's isolating himself here more and more. Soon he'll have construction build a cot into the office. Won't have to go home at all. I'm worried about him."

"*You* have no faith in *him*, Alec," Paul smiled.

"What kind of life does he lead? The studio. SHADO. Period. That's it."

"The life he chose a long time ago. You've known him practically forever. You know it's the life he wanted. It's part of him."

The two men chose chairs and sat down, ignoring the din as operatives came in for breakfast.

"It's different now, Paul. He's getting older. The last half of his life is coming up fast...."

* * *

Ed Straker's car bounced as the tyres rolled over a rock in the road. Ed jumped, looked around, and hit the steering wheel angrily. He'd come close to falling asleep and found himself in the middle of nowhere. Somehow he'd managed to become completely disoriented. A hard rain had begun to fall, and there were hardly any cars on the road. However, nothing seemed familiar to him. I must be getting old, Ed thought resignedly. I just don't seem to handle giving up sleep the way I could years ago...and where in God's name am I? I don't even recognise this damn road.

Christ, where's the damn map? I could have them trace me on the transponder in the car. No. No. I'm not giving Alec the satisfaction of knowing he was right. That I was so tired I completely got lost. Well, I'll turn here. Got to be a way to get back on the right road somewhere around here.

Ed drove over to the side of the road and prepared to back up so that he could turn the car around. The motor roared but nothing happened. Fine. Great. This is just terrific. Tyres are stuck in mud. Man against car and mud, he mused. Ed sighed, turned off the motor, opened the door, and got out. His ankle boots sunk quickly into the mud, and the rain dotted his cream-coloured jacket. Yes, this day is starting out just wonderfully. He reached behind his seat to open a compartment that contained some SHADO equipment, but what he was after was a pouch of tools.

It took Ed a considerable amount of time, but he managed to clear away enough mud so that he thought he could get the car moved. He was soaked through and miserable. You're an

idiot. You have got to do all this yourself. What the hell is the car phone for? No, you have to conquer the problem by yourself, and you have to go without sleep. For what? To prove what? That you've--"Uhhhh!" Ed cried, as his foot got caught in something concealed in the mud. Ed fell to the ground, landing hard on his knee and shin. He stood tentatively, putting some weight on the injured leg. It worked; he could walk, so he must have just torn tendons rather than breaking anything. He limped back into the car, shut the doors, and shot a look into the driver's glass, but it was hardly necessary. The road was deserted. Even birds knew better than to be out on such a miserable winter day, Ed thought. His leg throbbed at him. He turned the key in the ignition, and yes, the wheels obeyed. He pulled back and at the last minute saw something flash by in the driver's glass. He couldn't stop the car in time, and the wheels made a sickening crunching sound as they rolled over something hard. He hit the brakes, turned off the motor, punched the car door control, and looked.

A small boy lay unmoving in the road. Ed's insides twisted. He felt like he was going to faint. Oh, Christ, I've hit him. Oh, Christ, I've killed a child. God help me. God, God, I've hit a boy....

Ed got out of the car and moved toward the figure. He felt as slow as a pearl moving through molasses. Yes. Yes. He was going to pass out.

"You stupid shithead! You stupid idiot! Ya ruined my bike!!!" the boy yelled at him.

It took Ed several seconds to process that the boy was alive, getting up, and shouting insults at him. I will not pass out, he told himself. Then something occurred to him.

"No! Don't get up! You might be seriously hurt! You may be injured. I'll call an--" Ed suddenly let out a primitive scream as the boy kicked him in the injured shin. Ed fell to his knees before collapsing on his side, producing a crunching noise as his hip hit the rocks at the side of the road. He shut his eyes for a moment in agony, then quickly sicked up the last meal he'd had in the cafeteria. Then he just lay there.

"Ya ruined my bike...my new bike..." the boy said, as if that explained everything. He was now a bit puzzled as to how he'd managed to quickly turn this muddied, strange-looking adult into a quite helpless figure. "I didn't mean to hurt ya that bad, mister...look. I ain't hurt. I jumped off when I seen ya. Just messed up my elbows." The boy looked worried now. "Are ya gonna be okay?"

Ed opened his eyes and managed to sit up. He looked over at what appeared to be a twisted bicycle frame. From somewhere, he didn't know where, he got his sense of humour back.

"I think I did more than ruin it. I think I killed it," Ed said. The boy obviously was fine. Except for his vocabulary. That needed help, thought Ed. Relief flooded over him.

"Hey what kinda car is that? It's cool." The boy said. The boy ran over and slid into the driver's seat.

"If you're thinking in terms of trade, car for ruined bike, you can forget it."

"What kinda car is this?" the boy asked again. Ed made a few attempts to get up that were less than satisfactory.

"It's an expensive car. Now get out, and help me get up." Ed's tone may have been a little weaker than his usual commanding voice, but the boy got the message. The boy scrambled out and helped Ed to his feet. Ed leaned against the car for a while. He felt dizzy.

"You don't look so good."

"How encouraging. Get in. No, not my seat. There."

The boy seemed a bit puzzled at being seated on the left, but he sat and waited for Ed to

get in, rapidly taking in everything on the console. Ed slowly and painfully slid in, trying to favour the injured leg. He thumbed the door controls. The doors lowered and shut securely.

"WOW! Cool!"

Ed grinned. The smile quickly faded as he started up the car.

"What in God's name were you doing riding an bicycle this time of the morning in a downpour?"

"Ya talk funny," the boy grinned.

"Answer me." It cost Ed an effort not to grin again. Ed realised that more often than not, he let British lilt into his speech and sometimes spoke with a tinge of a British accent. After all, despite being born in Boston, he'd spent nearly his whole life in England.

The boy obviously was American. Around eight or so. Ed could remember being that age. Far too young to handle responsibility. Far too old not to have something expected of you. Impatient. Determined. Cocky. Caught between a rock and a hard place. Too eager for life. Like John--no, he couldn't let himself think of his son. Too painful.

Yet when he'd seen the crumpled figure on the road, the sight of his bloodied unconscious son had come into his mind. Suddenly all the buried memories came flooding back to him. No, he thought. Oh God, I don't want to see my son like that. God, I don't want to remember. No, no, no, he thought. Can't think about that right now, I **won't** think about that right now. NO!

The boy shrugged.

"I was runnin' away."

"What's your name? Why were you running away?" asked Ed.

"Josh."

"Josh what?"

"Just Josh. I hate Joshua. So it's just Josh."

"Why did you run away? Your parents must be awake by now and worried out of their minds. If I were your father--" Damn it, thought Ed. No. Your son is dead. Dead. This isn't your boy....

"They don't care," Josh said.

"I'll call them. Do you know your number?"

"Can't we go for a ride in this? Can't we go for a long ride? You broke my bike. Ya owe me somethin'," the boy insisted.

"Josh, I have to call them. I can't just...."

The boy pulled up his muddied and torn T-shirt, revealing several bruises. They were beginning to fade and couldn't have been from the fall he'd taken when the car had hit the bike.

"See? They beat me! That's why I was runnin' away."

"My God," Ed exclaimed softly, sickened.

"What's your name?" Josh asked.

"Hmm? Straker. Ed Straker."

"What kinda name is Straker?"

"You ask too many questions," smiled Ed. "Look, Josh, I have certain contacts in the Metropolitan Police. I know some people. No one will lay a hand on you again."

"I don't wanna hafta go home," the boy began to weep.

"Oh, God. Oh, don't do *that*," Ed pleaded. "I will take you to the police, explain the situation. You may not have to go home." Ed reached over and stroked the boy's hair.

"Can't we go for a ride first? Can't we make the car go fast? How fast can the car go? Can

it go real fast?"

"It isn't exactly a race car," sighed Ed. He pressed a concealed button which took a photograph of his passenger. He then pushed a few buttons on the console. Josh was watching him intently.

"What's all those buttons?"

"Radar detectors," grinned Ed. "In case I go real fast." Ed picked up the phone and within a few seconds got an answer.

"Straker here. I'm transmitting, I need an identification. Not urgent, whenever you can. Thanks." Ed hung up the phone. He suddenly grinned.

"I'm hungry. I think if I go real fast, I can get to a restaurant before anyone else does. Put on your harness."

"Huh?"

"Seatbelt. There." Ed leaned over and fastened the harness securely around Josh, then adjusted his own belt. "Watch that speedometer."

The needle slid effortlessly to 250 kilometers per hour. The boy looked puzzled.

"We'e traveling at 150 miles per hour, Josh"

"All right!! Wooo!" Josh said, and Ed chuckled. Ed watched the boy for a second, and then paid his attention to his driving. There were some advantages to being head of SHADO, he mused...one didn't have to worry about traffic tickets....

Strange, Ed thought. I'm not tired. Leg doesn't hurt all that much. What would Alec say if he knew I was deliberately using SHASO technology and speeding for no other reason than to impress a small boy? Ed grinned at that idea. Probably have me committed...head of Harlington-Straker Studios goes on joyride....

* * *

Alec and Paul strolled into SHADO Control where Lieutenant Adam Garfield, SHADO's chief computer technician, was hard at work.

"I hear you solved the computer mess," Paul said cheerfully, grinning at Garfield.

Garfield grinned back and replied, "Running fine, Sir. Needed the chips replaced, though. Commander Straker will be relieved to hear we've fixed it."

"Let's not tell Ed just yet. He's probably off in dreamland somewhere by now and we wouldn't want to disturb him," Alec said with a chuckle.

"Even if he *did* cost me fifty pounds," laughed Paul.

"No, Sir." Garfield said.

"*No*?" Alec frowned. "I'm the senior officer when the Commander is off duty, and I don't want him informed yet. He needs to get a decent amount of sleep."

"No, no, I didn't mean that, Sir. I meant the Commander isn't in dreamland. At least, I don't think so."

"How would you know?" Paul asked.

"He radioed in a photograph this morning. Computer's still searching for the ID he wanted. He didn't say he wanted a priority on it, so the duty officer who took the accompanying call didn't scan it through until a few minutes ago."

"What?? Damn that man! Unless he's found an alien--where's the photograph now?"

"Lieutenant Ford's working on it, Sir."

* * *

"In his car??? A boy?" Paul blinked at the photo.

"Muddy-looking one at that. What on earth is Ed playing at?" Alec sighed. "All right

Ford. Call the Commander."

"I tried, Sir. I have an ID on the boy. Positive one. I wanted to tell him. But he isn't answering his car phone or his pager."

"Paul, he's gotten himself into trouble. I just know it. Who's the boy?"

"Joshua Daniel Parker. American. Age seven. Went missing. His mother said he'd left her a message and ran away from home. A photograph was radioed to the police and major news stations. Apparently she's some sort of graphic design executive. Anyway, he must have gone off on his bicycle; his father had bought it for him, and he seemed quite attached to it."

"What the devil is he doing with Ed?" Paul wondered. "Where's the boy's father?"

"There was no other mention of the boy's father. Sir, we have an obligation to contact the police and tell them the boy was with Commander Straker. At least, he was when that photograph came in at 5:32 am," Ford frowned.

"My priority right now isn't that boy. I want to find the Commander," scowled Alec. "It's not like him to not answer his pager. Come on, Paul. Ford, sit on this until we get back to you. And keep trying to reach the Commander."

"Yes, Sir."

Ford watched them go, then looked again at the picture of the boy. He'd heard once that the Commander had a young son who was killed in an accident. Still, it was difficult to picture Straker as a father....

* * *

"You must have a hole in your stomach. I've never seen anyone put away so much food," Ed grinned.

Josh bit into a chip quite happily. "Calling French fries chips' is dumb! I'm hungry."

Ed smiled. "That's apparent."

Upon realizing his own less-than-satisfactory appearance, not to mention Josh's, Ed had taken the boy to his flat long enough to shower and get a change of clothes. He ordered Josh to take a bath, and he reluctantly complied. On impulse, Ed then cooked breakfast for the boy, instead of heading to a restaurant as he'd planned. Ed had glanced at the phone a few times, but shrugged. He was aware now that the crunch he'd heard the second time he fell was not further damage to him, but to his now useless pager, so he'd have to depend on the car phone to find out whether or not they'd ID'd Josh. However, Ed had to admit being reluctant to do anything about it. Ed had checked his leg, and not surprisingly, it was swollen. Well when he got back to SHADO, he'd let the medical centre have a look at it. He'd swallowed down some painkillers with his breakfast juice and wasn't in much pain. The boy seemed somewhat surprised that Ed didn't burn a single strip of bacon. He'd been astonished when Ed squeezed fresh oranges for juice.

Ed looked longingly at the boy.

Longer you keep him with you, Straker, the harder it's going to be to turn him over to the police and just forget him... he told himself. Ed shrugged mentally. I'll deal with that later, he decided. He'd left his flat and taken Josh for an extended ride, getting to know him. Before the both of them had realised it, it was lunchtime.

Ed put aside his memories of the morning and turned his attention back to the restaurant. Ed took a bite of his chef's salad. He tried to think of when he'd had enough time to sit and have a full meal. He found he couldn't.

Ed drummed his fingers on the table.

"What we gonna do after lunch?" Josh asked through a mouthful of burger.

Ed gave him a practiced stern look. He'd used that look on Alec often. It didn't seem to have much effect on Josh. Come to think of it, as the years had gone by, it didn't bother Alec much either. Ed figured he was slipping. All right, tone of voice should do it.

"Hasn't anyone told you that talking with your mouth full is rude?" Ed demanded.

"Nah," Josh said. He blew bubbles in his milk. Ed watched him disapprovingly.

"Josh," he said meaningfully.

The boy seemed to take this as an all systems go to blow even more bubbles in his milk.

Ed lowered his voice to the point where only the boy could hear it. This time, he spoke more like the Commander Straker that SHADO personnel dreaded.

"JOSH," Ed snapped. The boy stopped and looked at Ed. Ed's expression remained stern.

"Drink your milk and finish your burger. I have one place we need to stop, and then I'm going to have to make that phone call."

The boy sighed. "What's gonna happen? I told ya I didn't want to go home."

"There are choices life makes for us that sometimes we don't like. Sometimes there's really nothing we can do about it. We just have to have faith. Nobody's going to hit you again, I *promis*. But you've got to trust me. Okay?"

"Why can't I stay with ya, Ed? I like ya, Ed. I like your place. Ya cook better than my mom. She always burns the bacon. Why can't ya take care of me?"

"Do you think I really want a boy who blows bubbles in his milk and eats more food in one meal than I have in my entire life?" Ed smiled. "I couldn't afford the food bill alone."

"Uh huh, if ya can afford that cool car, ya can afford burgers," the boy giggled.

"Know what your problem is? You're far too smart for your age," Ed said in a mock grave manner.

"Know what your problem is? You talk funny!" Josh giggled.

"My problem is that I didn't run over you instead of your bicycle. Next time I'll aim better," declared Ed in a deadpan manner.

"Will not!" Josh reached over and lightly pinched Ed's arm. "Got ya! "

Ed looked at him angrily. Josh frowned.

"I didn't mean ta hurt ya. Was only teasin' ya, Ed. Don't be mad at me." The boy seemed solemn.

Ed gave a sudden wide grin. "Got ya," Ed said in a decent imitation of the boy's voice. Josh's mouth dropped open, and then he started giggling.

"Not fair!!"

"Who said I had to be fair?" Ed reached over, stole, and calmly ate one of Josh's chips.

* * *

The thirty-ish blonde woman with the delicate features sobbed. "You say you know your friend was with my Joshua?"

"Yes, Mrs. Parker. We're just wondering if you might recognise Mr. Straker, or know why he might have been with him." Paul held up a promotional photo of Straker, taken for studio publicity purposes.

"No, never saw him in my life. We've only been in England a few weeks. Long enough to have my divorce processed from Dan. Dan and I...we didn't get along...the divorce was hard on Joshua...oh Mr. Foster, if anything's happened to my son, I love him so much...." She dissolved into sobs again.

"Believe me, Mrs. Parker, if he's with Ed--Mr. Straker--then he's in safe hands," Alec assured her. However, Alec felt anything but assured. Alec's pager buzzed. "Do you mind if I

use your phone briefly, Mrs. Parker?"

The woman blew her nose, looked at Alec, and shook her head. Alec dialed the studio and was patched in to HQ. "Freeman..." he said into the receiver. "What??? WHEN? Damn! All right. Yes. Yes. Okay. Keep trying." Alec hung up. "My associate tried some places where Mr. Straker commonly goes. The owner of a restaurant said he just left about fifteen minutes ago with a small boy named Josh. He said the two of them seemed fine. He thought they were father and son. Ed paid with one of his credit cards so we got a positive ID, and from the description of the boy and the name...well, it can't be anything but positive."

"Oh thank God, thank God!" the woman hugged Alec and then Paul. They smiled.

"Only a matter of time now, Mrs. Parker. I want to find my friend as much as you do your son," smiled Alec.

* * *

"I think you better settle on another colour T-shirt. That lime-green one looks like it would register on a geiger counter," Ed judged.

"Ya said I could have any one I wanted," Josh complained. The two of them were at a department store, and Ed was looking at a pair of driving gloves when Josh marched up to him triumphantly with the loudest T-shirt Ed had ever viewed in his life.

"I didn't know you'd come back with that thing. All right. All right. No, wait, wait for the shop assistant to ring it up for heaven's sake. Here. Give it to me." Ed took it, chose a pair of brown leather driving gloves, and went with Josh to the counter. The clerk looked at the boy very strangely and then at Ed.

"Have you found everything you wanted, Sir? Will that be all?"

"Yes. Thank you. The boy would like to wear the shirt, so can you ring that up straightaway?" Ed took his credit card out of his wallet. It had been a while since it had taken this kind of a pounding. He gave it to the woman. The woman seemed upset about something.

"Sir, excuse me, I will have to ask my assistant for the proper code to enter for this card. I'm...I'm new."

"That's fine," nodded Ed. The woman disappeared into the back room. Several minutes went by.

Ed was on the verge of going back there when a man came out and studied him carefully. The woman stood nervously at his side. Josh was looking at sunglasses and wasn't paying attention.

"Sorry for the delay, Sir. There's been a problem with your card. May I see some identification?" the man said.

"Certainly." Ed handed him his driver's license. Quite suddenly, someone grabbed him from behind.

"What the...?"

"HEY!" Josh yelled, as a police officer quickly handcuffed Ed. "HEY! He didn't do nothin'! You can't do that!"

"Its all right, you're quite safe now. We'll take you back to your mother. Mr. Straker, you're under arrest for suspicion of kidnapping."

"That is ridiculous. Does the boy look like he's been kidnapped?" Ed said angrily.

"Did this man hurt you in any way? Did he molest you?" another officer said to Josh. Still another studied Ed's ID and wallet.

"All right. I've had enough of this," snapped Ed.

"Come with me, now, Joshua," a policewoman said. She reached toward him, and he

jumped out and bit her. She shrieked, and Josh tore out of the room.

"JOSH!" shouted Ed in despair, but the policewoman dug her trucheon painfully into the small of Ed's back, and another yanked him sharply. Ed let his body go limp, and they led him away.

* * *

"Commander Straker on the line for you, Sir," Miss Ealand said.

"Thank God!" Alec picked up the phone in relief. "ED! My God, we've been trying to find you for hours. We were worried out of our minds. What?" Alec said in disbelief. "You're *where*?"

"Alec. Just get down here. I'll answer your questions later. Just get me out of this place. Oh, and have medical centre reserve a bed for me. I'm going to need it," came the familiar but weary voice on the other end of the line. Then a click as Ed disconnected.

* * *

Some time later, in Straker's office:

* * *

"Ed, you should let me handle this. You shouldn't even be here. Dr. Thorne said you should stay off that leg, even with that cast on it."

"Alec, I made a lot of mistakes with Josh. If I'd taken him back immediately, and taken care of it..." sighed Ed.

"Only proves you're human," smiled Alec.

Ed shook his head. "It's not finished, Alec. I *have** to know that the boy is all right. I told the police that he'd been beaten. The bruises..."

"I told you, Ed. Paul and I went out to see the woman. We were there when they returned the boy. He didn't get far after they arrested you. I'm telling you, Ed, there's *no* way that woman would lay a hand on that boy. It's out of your hands."

"I gave him my word, Alec. Have them bring one of the jeeps around for me. I'm going out there."

"Ed, you're causing yourself unnecessary pain." Alec frowned. "I can imagine he reminds you of Joh--"

"I think I told you once to stay out of my personal life, Colonel. Besides, I'm not even officially on duty. Now, are you going to arrange for my jeep, or do I have to?" snapped Ed.

"I'll do it. Why do you want a jeep and not a car?"

"Just do it, Alec." Ed reached for his cane.

Alec gave a heavy sigh and left.

* * *

Ed double checked the address. Yes. 15 Davenport Centre, apartment 12. He was grateful for the lift, as walking came a little slower these days with his leg in a cast. He made his way to number 12 slowly, with the help of the cane and listened a while, then knocked sharply. The woman Alec had described to him came to the door.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Parker, may I come in? I was the one who initially ran into your son. Quite literally, in fact."

"Of course! I thought you looked familiar! Come in! Can I get you some coffee?"

Ed entered and she closed the door behind her. Some drawings were up on easels.

"You'll have to forgive the mess. I'm working on a project. Keeps me busy. Keeps my mind off Josh."

"Does it? Does it keep you from thinking about hitting him? Did you beat him for running away?"

"What? What?"

"Listen to me very carefully, Mrs. Parker. I'm going to have Josh taken away from you. You aren't going to lay a hand on that child again. Now I want to see Josh."

"I don't know how you would think such a thing! I love my son! God knows...Mr. Straker...he hasn't spoken...hasn't said a word since they brought him home...I've been so upset...the doctors said there's nothing wrong with him...they examined him...but he won't speak to me. I know he blames me for the divorce..." she sobbed.

Straker frowned. "You and your husband have divorced?"

"I had no choice, believe me, Daniel beat me. He'd get drunk, yell at me for spending too much time with Josh after he was born...he was always jealous of my relationship with my son. He'd do it and then promise never to do it again...I'm telling you...I'd never hit Josh...I'd never hit anyone!" she exclaimed.

"Did your husband beat Josh?"

"No, God no! I'd never let that happen!"

"Someone caused those bruises. I'm going to find out who," Ed replied. "Now where is Josh? I want to see him."

"Upstairs...I finally got him to take a nap...I'll get him...but I've told you...he won't say a word...he blames me for everything," the woman sighed. She disappeared up the stairs. Ed sank upon a couch. What was he supposed to believe? He rubbed the bridge of his nose again.

A familiar figure raced down the stairs.

"ED! ED! ED! It's you!"

"Josh." Ed reached out and hugged the boy. He looked at the woman. "Doesn't speak?" he said accusingly.

"I swear to you Mr. Straker, he hasn't said a thing since he's come home. Oh Josh, you're all right!"

"Yeah. Ed did they hurt ya? Did they put ya in jail? I didn't wanna leave ya like that, but I didn't wanna go home."

"Why? Tell me why you didn't want to go home. Tell me and I'll take you out of here. Tell me what you told me before."

Josh frowned. He looked down at the rug.

"Don't be scared. I'm here. She can't hurt you."

"Josh did you tell him I beat you?" his mother remarked in disbelief.

"Kinda."

"Why?" his mother wailed.

"Dunno."

"Wait a minute. Are you saying that what you told me is a lie? Josh. Look at me. Did you lie?" Ed said, with an ever-growing sinking feeling.

"Kinda. I wanted to go for a ride in your car. And I didn't wanna go home. I messed everything up."

Ed dropped his face into his palm for a moment. He looked up at Josh, and pressed the bridge of his nose. "The bruises...."

"Oh Mr. Straker...his father sent that bicycle, and Josh had hardly gotten used to a bicycle," sighed the woman. "He thought he could bribe his way into my life again."

"I fell off it a lot and got all messed up. I mess everything up. Wasn't for me..." Josh's

lower lip trembled, "wasn't for me...if it wasn't for me, you'd still be with Daddy. You were happy and all, but you left him," Josh cried. "So I ran away to make things all good again...."

"Oh Josh. You think it was all your fault! Oh my Joshjosh. My baby!" she wept. "Don't you know that you mean everything to me?"

"Ed?"

"Go and comfort your mother," sighed Ed.

"Ed, please don't be mad at me. I really like ya. I thought they'd hurt ya. The cops wouldn't tell me nothin'; they wouldn't say if they had ya or not. I'm sorry I lied, Ed, I really am."

"So I drove you all around, cooked you breakfast, bought you lunch, and got myself arrested for nothing?"

"Don't be mad. Please. I was just playin'. I wanted to ride in your car. I wanted a dad who liked me. I was pretendin' you were my dad. Please. Don't be mad. Mom, tell him not to be mad."

Ed was silent for a moment. ...pretending you were my dad. The phrase seemed to echo in his mind. Old but familiar pain welled in him. Johnny.... Ed put it out of his mind. He frowned. He looked into Josh's sad eyes.

"Child's play. All of this was child's play. I should have known. You lied, and I bought you a bicycle for nothing," Ed said. A small smile played upon his lips. He winked at Josh's mother.

"BIKE? Ya bought me a bike??" Josh shouted. "Where?"

Ed shrugged. "In my jeep, I suppose. Downstairs. You can get it while your mother gets me some coffee." Ed fished in his pocket for the jeep's keys. "Bright blue jeep. Parked in front of the building. Lime-green brand new bicycle in the back. Visible for miles." He threw Josh the keys. Josh caught them effortlessly, jumping around.

"WOW! Mom! A new bike!" Josh raced out.

His mother laughed. "How do you like your coffee, Mr. Straker?"

"Call me Ed. Cream and two sugars, and could you possibly find me some aspirin? My leg's beginning to be difficult again."

A short time later, she called from the kitchen, "Are you married, Ed?"

As she returned with the coffee and aspirin, he accepted his cup, swallowed the pills with a swig of coffee, drew his mouth into a tight, thin line, and solemnly replied, "No." I'm fighting a losing battle, he told himself. No matter how hard I try to keep the memories buried, they rise from the grave like ghosts-- He promptly cut off that line of thought and stared moodily into his coffee, wondering what it would have been like if his life had gone in another direction, if he hadn't chosen to accept SHADO, if he had not sealed his fate.

She continued while he was deep in thought. "Oh, that's too bad. You should get married and have kids. You'd make a wonderful father."

His expression turned sorrowful for a moment, and he was grateful to be distracted by the sound of Josh slamming the door as he ran back in. The boy was so happy he was practically bouncing off the walls. A slight smile finally crossed Ed's lips, and he took a sip of his steaming coffee.

* * *

Ed sat at his desk, turning his paperweight around and around. Leaving the Parkers had turned out to be more difficult than he'd expected. They'd begged him to stay a while. He'd accepted Joanne Parker's offer of dinner but had refused to give Josh a ride in the jeep, saying

that had been the cause of his problems. Reluctantly, he'd wished them both good night, thanked Joanne for the dinner, hugged Josh, collected his keys, and gone back to SHADO with a feeling of accomplishment. He'd arranged for them to be shown around the studio but hadn't seen to it himself, explaining that his work prevented that. The truth had been that his small taste of being a father again was too much for him, and he wanted to avoid Josh. He looked up as Alec came in.

"Your VIP guests finally went home. That Josh certainly is a bundle of energy."

"Yes. Yes. He is." Ed nodded thoughtfully. Ed knew he'd never see him again.

"How'd it go, Ed?"

"Oh, it was child's play, Alec." Ed smiled.

"It's getting late. You should go home and get some sleep," Alec said. "Rest that leg."

Ed put the paperweight back in its proper place. He reached for his cane.

"Yes, and I'm tired. Have them bring the car around front, will you?"

"You're going home?" Alec's jaw dropped as he began blinking.

Ed's voice rose sharply. "I believe you just suggested I do so. Unless you need me for something?"

"No no no, it's just that..." Alec stammered.

"Yes?"

"Nothing. Good night, Ed."

"See you in the morning, Alec."

* * *

Ed was well aware that Alec had watched him go out. He smiled to himself at Alec's bewilderment at the lack of an argument, for he'd gotten the desired results. Ed got into his car. He drove past the studio guard, nodding. Ed drove for several minutes. He thought about the surprise on Alec's face.

"Got ya," Ed said aloud. Ed smiled ever so sadly. He sighed. Not long after, safe in his home, Ed fell asleep.

The end