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**MICHAEL  
PALMER**



**NATURAL  
CAUSES**

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**MICHAEL PALMER**



**BANTAM BOOKS**

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NATURAL CAUSES

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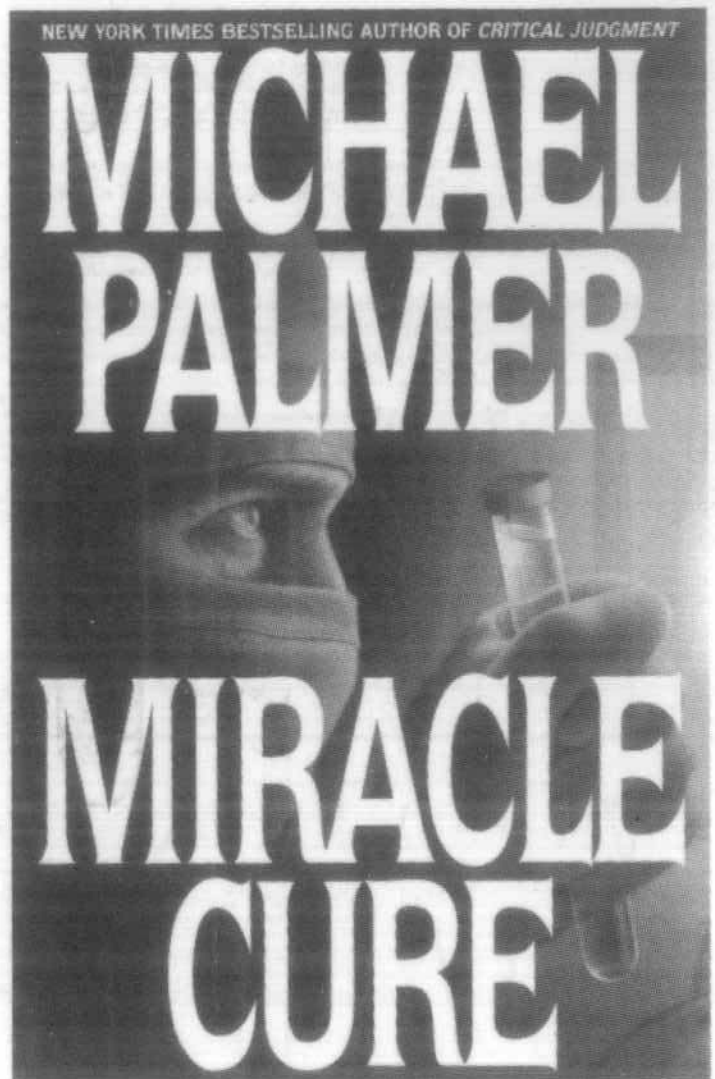
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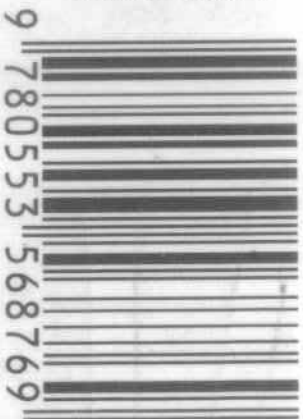
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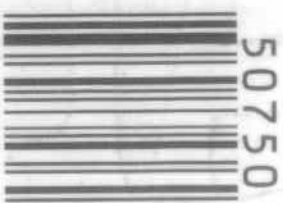


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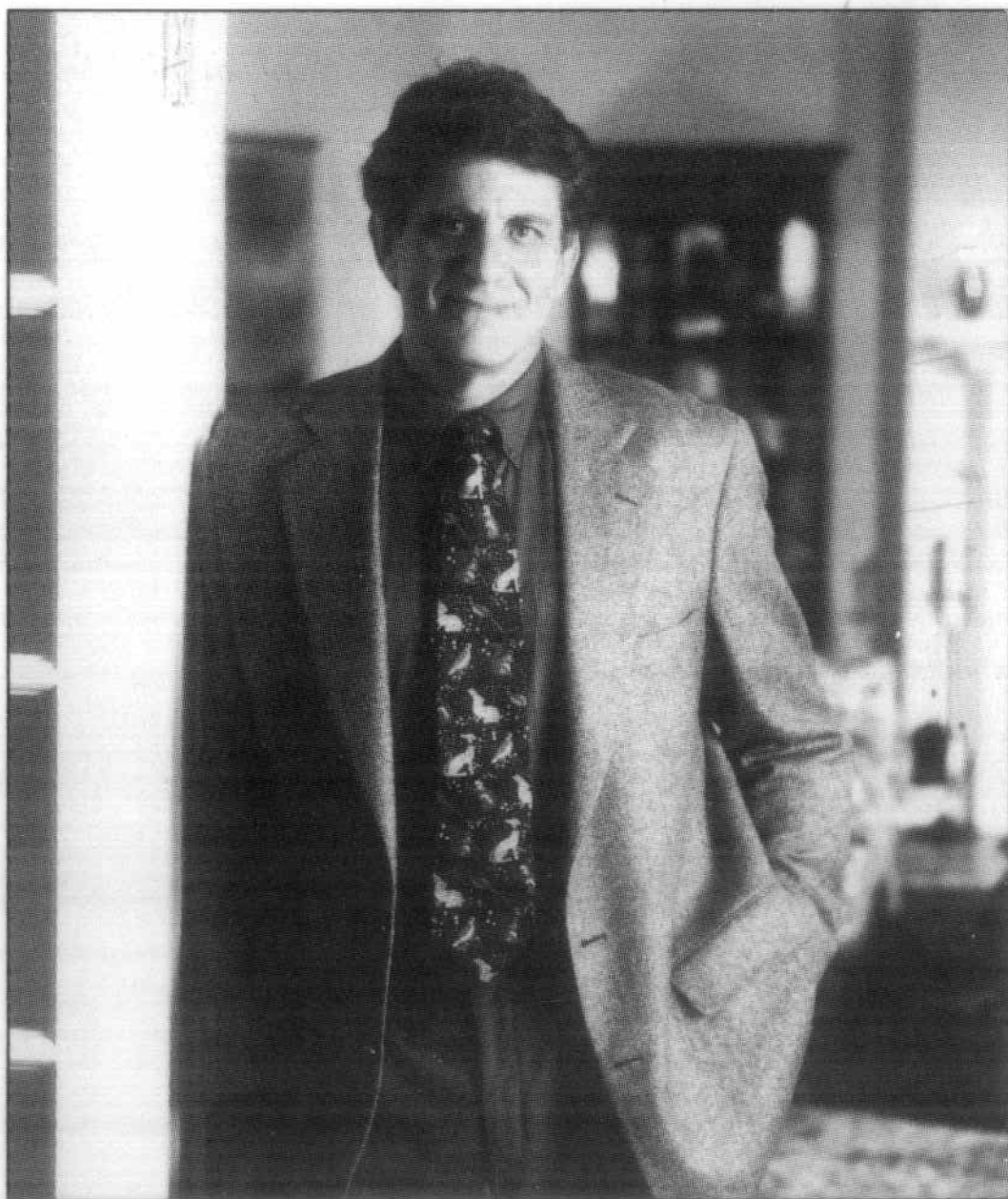
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Michael Palmer is the bestselling author of *Silent Treatment*, *Natural Causes*, *Extreme Measures*, *Flashback*, *Side Effects*, *The Sisterhood*, *Critical Judgment*, and *Miracle Cure*. He has practiced medicine for more than twenty years, most recently as an emergency room physician.

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**Luke Harrison Palmer**  
Welcome, big guy

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If you read the "About the Author" page, please read this page as well. The people listed below are very much about the author, and share my deepest thanks.

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# PROLOGUE

**C**ONNIE HIDALGO'S CONTRACTIONS HAD BEEN LITTLE more than twinges for the first two hours of the drive; but as she and her fiancé passed the New London exits on I-95, the tightening within her began to intensify.

"Billy, I think something's happening," she said.

"Gimme a break. You been sayin' that for a goddamn month, and you still got a month to go."

"I should have stayed home."

"You should have done exactly what you're doin', which is to make this trip to New York and help me make this buy."

"Well, at least you couldda taken the Mercedes. This seat is killing me."

Connie knew that taking the slick 500SL had been out of the question. The last thing Billy Molinaro wanted was to attract attention—or car thieves. Besides, he never was one to change his routine, especially when things were going well. The battered Ford wagon had always been their way into and out of Manhattan. There wasn't a chance in the world he would have agreed to

doing anything differently this night. He hadn't told her how much money they were carrying in the two gym bags stuffed in the tire well, but she knew it was plenty—more than ever before.

She squirmed as another contraction built and stared out the window, trying to lose herself in the lights and signs as they flashed past. She was a slight woman—all belly, Billy kept saying—with wide, dark eyes and a fine, smooth face that she had learned made most men want her. At fourteen, she had delivered a baby girl and had given it away without so much as looking at it. Now, ten years later, God had blessed her with a second chance. And nothing was going to go wrong. Nothing.

"Billy, I love you," she said softly.

"In that case, light this for me."

He slipped a fat joint from beneath his seat, licked it expertly, and leaned toward her.

"Billy, no. It's bad for the baby."

"*Crack* is bad for the baby," he corrected. "That's why I haven't let you do any since we found out you were pregnant. But no one has ever shown nothing wrong with weed. Trust me on that one."

"Well, at least open the window."

Connie lit the joint and, in spite of herself, breathed in deeply as he exhaled. As always, Billy was right. She had smoked daily during her first pregnancy—cigarettes and marijuana—and the baby had been born plump and perfect.

"Now listen," Billy said. "Manny Diaz is a slime, but after all the deals him and me've done together, I pretty much trust him—especially with you around to translate when he won't talk English. But this is bigger than any of those other deals, so we gotta take extra precautions. I'm gonna have you stay out in front with the motor running. You keep the doors locked until I come out and tell you it's okay. If anything doesn't seem right—anything at all—just get the hell away and call my cousin Richie in Newark. Got that?"

"I got it. I got it."

Another contraction hit. Connie clenched her teeth and pressed her slender fingers against her womb. She had had two bouts of false labor in the past two weeks, and felt more certain than not that this was the same deal. She checked Billy's watch. If the contractions continued to be this bad, she would begin to time them.

But as she worked at convincing herself that there was nothing happening for her to worry about, Connie began to experience another kind of pain—this one in the tips of her fingers. At first she couldn't really call it a pain. It was more of a numbness—an unpleasant lack of feeling. By Stamford, the numbness had given way to a persistent, electric discomfort—worse when she pressed down, but not completely gone when she didn't. Huddled in the darkness, she tested her fingertips one by one. All of them ached.

It was nerves, just nerves, she thought. Billy had relit the joint. One toké wouldn't hurt, and it would probably help a great deal. Connie pulled his hand over, pressed her lips to the moist paper, and breathed in until she couldn't hold any more. It had been nearly six months since she had been even a little bit stoned. Surely one toké wasn't going to hurt the baby. In fact, she reasoned, with what it had in store, the little thing probably needed a buzz even more than she did.

By New Rochelle, Connie had smoked all of one joint herself. The pain in her fingers was no less, and the contractions were still coming every five minutes or so, but neither bothered her as much.

"Billy, I feel better," she said.

"I knew you would, Sugar."

Within just a few miles, though, she sensed the buzzing pain beginning in her toes. Frightened, she tried another joint.

"Hey, back off that stuff," Billy said.

"I think the baby's coming."

"Well, I hope he knows enough to stay put until we

get this deal done. I need you behind this wheel to do it right. Besides, if we blow it, the kid'd be better off not coming out at all."

"Billy, I'm serious."

"And what do you think I am—the Good Humor man?" He glanced nervously at his watch. "Right on schedule. We pull this buy off, Sugar, and we're in the big leagues. Believe me. This is the test Dominic has been waiting to give me. And nothing's gonna fuck it up."

Connie heard the intensity in her lover's voice and clenched her teeth against the throbbing in her hands and feet. Billy was right. It wasn't just their money at stake, it was their future. When she was younger and fat and unattractive, the only thing men ever wanted from her was sex. When she changed and became beautiful, the men who hit on her had more going for them—took her nicer places. But what they wanted was still the same. Only Billy had been different. He had made her his girl. And from the very beginning he had treated her with respect. Now they were about to have a child. And as soon as this deal was done, he had promised they would be married.

Whatever she had to do to help Billy Molinaro tonight, she would do. If only the aching would let up . . . just a little.

With a discomfort that nearly brought tears, she reached up and flicked on the overhead light.

"Hey, what're you doing?" Billy asked.

"Just . . . just looking for a tape to play."

She glanced at her hands, and then quickly switched off the light and pulled them from his line of sight. Her fingers and thumbs from the first knuckle to the tip had turned almost black. The rest of her hands was a dusky gray.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well, what tape did you pick?"

"Oh, I—I decided I'd rather rest."

*Please, God, she thought, just let me get through one more hour. Just one.*

It was after midnight when they rolled down the Harlem River Drive and turned off onto 116th Street. The fierce contractions in Connie's womb no longer concerned her as much as the fear that when they reached the meeting place, she would be unable to grasp the wheel, much less drive. Her left hand, now fixed in a semiclaw, was nearly useless. And although she could work her right hand and fingers, even slight movements of them sent intense pain shooting up her arm.

*Please, God. . . .*

"Well, this is it, Sugar," Billy said, stopping beneath a streetlight in front of a dilapidated tenement. "These guys are scared shitless of Dominic, so I don't expect any problems. It never hurts to cut the cards, though, especially with this size deal. So you stay here, doors locked, motor running. I'll go up and check their shit. If it's okay, we'll make the exchange right here on the street. Okay? Connie, I said 'Okay?'"

Connie Hidalgo, her hands and feet throbbing, bit at the inside of her lip while the pain from a particularly fierce contraction lanced through her. As the tightening subsided, she felt warmth begin to pool between her legs. Her water was breaking.

"P-please hurry," she managed. "The baby's going to come soon. I—I think we need to go to a hospital."

Billy snatched up his test kit and adjusted the holster beneath his left arm.

"You just goddamn keep it together until we're done," he snapped. "Understand?" He noticed the pain in her face, and his expression softened. "Connie, honey, everything will be all right. I promise. I'll finish this business with Diaz as quick as I can. And then if you want, I'll get you the best damn doctor in New York."

"But . . ."