

THE FASHIONS OF THE TIMES

a novel

by

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## CH 1

In all the time I spent with my grandfather, he only gave me one piece of advice. I was ten years old at the time, but I made it a point to remember everything about the day he bestowed his wisdom upon me. Even then, I knew someday I would look back on that afternoon and consider it a significant milestone in my life. The advice didn't make much sense at the time. It seemed crude. Rough. This, verbatim, is what he told me: "Jakie, never lift a man so high that he can to piss in your face."

My grandfather was a well mannered man, and except for that afternoon, he never uttered any profanities in my presence. He endowed his wisdom on me as we walked through Frick Park on a Sunday afternoon in autumn. The day was cold and the trees were bare. The air smelled of burning leaves and sulfurous odor of the coke ovens on the Monongahela River.

I was wearing a Pirate's baseball cap, but my grandfather was bare-headed. I remember that my enraged grandmother had nagged him to put on a hat as we prepared for our walk. She'd followed him through the house, from the kitchen, through the dining room and living room and into the foyer insisting if he didn't he put on a hat, he'd catch cold and die and then where would that leave her? The minute he opened the door and told me to come along, she stopped her screeching, god forbid one of the neighbors might actually *see* her nagging him (as if they didn't hear her verbally browbeating him day in and day out). My grandmother was the reason he passed his Sundays walking in the park with me, his only grandchild, born to his only son.

With me, he was kind and gentle, his patience unending. Only later in life did I hear stories of his win-at-all-costs attitude in the courtroom, and of his cowering clerks and associates with withering criticism. If he was a contentious son-of-a-bitch, the only evidence I ever had of it were the terrifyingly violent arguments he had with my grandmother. They'd argue about anything. Most of these screaming matches took place in the kitchen and usually centered around food. They invariably ended with my grandmother shrieking in German, and brandishing a kitchen utensil, most often a meat cleaver, in the air while my grandfather roared his protests. After he died, she lost much of her fight, partially, I think, because she no longer had anyone to quarrel with.

I remember insignificant things about my grandfather – the mingled fragrance of cologne and cigars, his crumpled roar of a voice, the feel of his enormous hand holding mine as we walked through Frick park on Sunday afternoons. I still have a hard time reconciling my memories of that truly "gentle" man who held my hand and patiently answered my tiresome questions, with the man whose reputation was that of a SOB who loved a good fight as much as he loved a good cigar. "Never lift a man so high that he can piss in your face." I assumed it was the essential piece of wisdom that had made him the man he was.

For years I believed his words were inscribed in gold leaf on the walls of the Duquesne Club, my grandfather's other refuge from my grandmother. I liked to think that the three-piece-suited, cigar smoking men sitting in overstuffed leather chairs in the reading room would raise their eyes from their newspapers and read my grandfather's words inscribed on the paneled walls, nodding their heads in knowing agreement.

They were fighting words, and though I guess I could admire that in him, I am and have always been a non-confrontational person. My grandfather's querulous behavior certainly turned my father against him. I don't blame him. Growing up in the shadow of fighting Abe Gold must have been a real pain in the ass, especially for the shy, book smart kid my father was. It took a long time, and I mean a *long* time, for him to come to terms with it, something like forty years.

But the point is that like my father, I don't like to fight, or want to fight – for anything. I just want to be left alone. But as my father warned me, (from all too painful experience) things aren't as easy as that.

I was a shy kid and my shyness was sometimes mistaken for some sort of intelligence, an assumed aptitude that piqued the interest of teachers and coaches who wanted to take me under their wing and appoint themselves my mentors.

Now, when you're ten years old and your grandfather tells you not to let anyone piss in your face, you tend not to trust anyone who offers favors for free. I'm sure the intentions of those would-be mentors were probably good, but I didn't want any part of them. I just wanted to be left alone to play in the sandbox by myself.

This reticence to accept a helping hand has been both a godsend and a hindrance in my life. It has saved me from more than a few bores, overly enthusiastic teachers, overzealous coaches. But there have been times when I should have accepted a helping hand and didn't. You don't always have to climb the mountain when the train can get you there in twenty minutes. But I have to admit I liked watching my would-be mentor's faces sour as they recognized the

fact I didn't want their help. That 'to hell with you then' expression would rise in their eyes, and then I could go on with my life, happily unmolested.

So I went through adolescence, four years of undergraduate study, and two more years of graduate school, and emerged with an academic, yet rather fundamental cynicism about the world. I thought I could get through life just fine if I just kept myself above it all. My first job, working at City Hall, knocked a little sense into me, but by the time I emerged from my next job at the law firm of Rifkin, Sampson, Kelly & Wells, I'd learned that fate's too mean a son-of-a-bitch to let you get through life unscathed.

After all was said and done, my heart was darkened, only a shade deeper perhaps, almost imperceptibly. It didn't make me forswear love or change my party affiliation, nothing that dire, but it led me to reassess the meaning of my grandfather's words, even as I was forced to apply them to him. Maybe that is what he'd intended that Sunday afternoon in Frick Park. This is how it all started:

It was early May 1990 and Spring had come late. The rain had been falling steadily for eight straight days. The Mayor's special task force I had been working on had handed in its findings on corruption in city hall and a Grand Jury had handed down several indictments. The Post-Gazette still found the indictments worthy of column space, although it had been bumped off page one by news of fifteen-year-old gang bangers shooting one other. The paper was full of accounts of the drive-by shootings that had shattered the almost small town quiet of the city of Pittsburgh. The news of the indictments at city hall was relegated to the city page and to an occasional angry letter to the editor.

The task force had been established by the mayor after the election. I got the job both as a reward for my work on the campaign (which I did to get credit for college) and to help pack city hall with warm bodies loyal to the new mayor. So, fresh with a graduate degree in public administration I undertook my assignment to ferret out corruption in City Hall with the zeal of a religious convert, and a paycheck to match.

In the end, you could say I learned two important lessons from my days on the task force. One: it is impossible to change city government, and Two: it's pretty damn hard to live the high life on the salary of a civil servant, even one charged with the noble task of fighting corruption. I should have expected the hostility exhibited by the people I investigated, hell, they were scared of losing their jobs. But I was more surprised by the attitude of those who I thought were on our side. Apparently not everyone in town was delighted with the vigor with which we did our duty.

The mayor had unseated an incumbent in the primary and the general election was a mere formality, because he was a Democrat and a Republican had hadn't held the Mayor's office in Pittsburgh in this century. After the bruising primary there was a call from within the party to mend fences, which was heeded as a single, gargantuan reality asserted itself – you can only air so much dirty laundry when it's in your own party. So in the end, after all the hard work done by the task force, far fewer indictments than recommended were passed down.

After a year and a half, not only had I failed to change city government single-handedly, but I was also still stuck in a sparsely furnished apartment in Shadyside and driving a used car. The only solace I could take from all this was

that someone had leaked the recommendations we'd made to the DA to the press, and a few letter-writing zealots were having a field day of it on the editorial page. One crotchety old man suggested that they reinstate the pillory so city residents could vent their anger at the bureaucrats who had squandered their tax dollars for so many years.

Other letters urged additional crackdowns. Still more cited the indictments as further proof of the decay of morals in society – man's own inhumanity to man, yadda, yadda, yadda, yadda. Another troubled soul blamed the breakdown of government on human consumption of animal flesh and the use of their skin and fur for clothing. All in all, it promised to be amusing reading for the bus ride home.

I was getting ready to leave when one of my co-workers, Phil Hendricks, barged into my office and informed me that the managing partner of Rifkin, Sampson, Kelly & Wells had just phoned the mayor to inquire about my services. Hendricks was somewhere between thirty-five and eighty-years-old and convinced his work was the most important enterprise in all of City Hall. I suppose he was harmless enough, but he kept trying to set me up on a blind date with his second cousin twice removed or something like that.

"How do you know this law firm is interested in me?" I asked.

"I overheard the mayor," he replied, happily tugging on his suspenders.

"What, are you tapping his phone now?" I asked.

"Very funny guy," he replied. He leaned over my desk so close that I could see his nose hairs quiver in excitement. "This is serious fellah. Rifkin, Sampson is a big firm. Big firm."

"I have no experience in law," I said.

"You've got a reputation," Hendricks said. "And they've been having troubles recently."

"I've got a reputation? Come on Phil."

"Of course you have a rep, a good rep," he replied. "Young kid with a pedigree like yours, grandfather a legend around town, comes in and single-handedly implicates half the city comptroller's office of improprieties everyone knew they were doing..."

"They didn't convict anyone, remember?"

"Doesn't matter, you've got the reputation, and now Rifkin, Sampson, Kelly and Wells wants you, you lucky son of a bitch."

"Wait Phil, let's start from the beginning. Tell me again. Who called?"

"Rifkin himself. Sounds like the old man's on the warpath." Hendricks rattled off a short history of the firm. All the men whose names were on the door were still alive, some more so than others, a few senior partners had recently jumped ship, and another was under indictment for some sort of real estate fraud.

I knew a bit about the firm. It was one of the top three in the city, a competitor of my grandfather's old firm.

Rifkin, Sampson had represented or been of-counsel to a number of large manufacturing companies around town, mostly mid-size steel firms.

Hendricks kept talking. "Justice department...Securities and Exchange Commission...investigations...a fellow, Buxton? Blanton, yes Blanton...Asian holding company... fraud...indictments...gorgeous secretaries."

"I have no skills they could possibly be interested in," I said.



"You have a reputation for finding things out," he replied. "A very good reputation. The Mayor highly recommended you." He looked at me earnestly, and I wondered what this cousin he was trying to set me up with could possibly look like. He was about thirty pounds overweight, slicked his hair back with some oily tonic, and possessed a wardrobe that could make a used car salesman blush. "At least meet with Rifkin and see what he's offering," he suggested with a gap-toothed grin. "It's a golden opportunity."

He left my office and I glanced through a small article on the business page about the firm in the Post-Gazette. It was rather vague. There was a quote from the managing partner, claiming that the troubles they had been experiencing, would, in the long run, provide them with an opportunity to strengthen the firm. It didn't take a genius to read between the lines to tell there was more to the story. After all, it's not often that even large law firms make the newspaper. You can be assured they see to it they don't.

I can't deny I was interested, but being some big shot lawyer's personal hatchet man was not a role I relished. Maybe they really were interested in my abilities. But mention of my "reputation" and the allusions to my family history made me nervous.

The Mayor's secretary called me and said he wanted to see me immediately. So much for going home early, I thought. The Mayor stayed brief, telling me significantly less than Hendricks had. When he finished telling me what I already knew, he said he was going to miss my good work and handed me a piece of paper with the law firm's phone number on it.

Once I got back to my office I glanced at the piece of paper and picked up the phone. A cold voice on the other end of the line answered.

"Mr. Rifkin's office."

"Ah, yes, this is Jacob Gold."

"Yes Mr. Gold, we've been expecting your call."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Mr. Rifkin will meet with you tomorrow morning at 9:30."

I was silent.

"Does that suit you?"

"Yes, I...suppose so."

"Good we'll see you then. Good bye," she said, then hung up.

I sat for a moment listening to the dial tone.

"Christ," I muttered.

So there I was, twenty six years old, with six years of college and nothing to show for it except two diplomas and a car loan. Law firms paid well, extremely well compared to City Hall. And then there was the looming threat of becoming accustomed to life in local government. A little voice in the back of my head reminded me that if I wasn't careful, I'd wake up in thirty years and realize I'd only made it to the fourth floor of city hall, having become the same sort of lifer I'd recommended for indictment. Worse yet, I could turn into a Hendricks. Maybe this thing with the law firm was just the thing I needed.

Hendricks stuck his head in the doorway.

"You gonna meet with Rifkin?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Have a ball," he said. I told him I would and put on my raincoat and headed out the door.

"Lucky dog," he said as I passed him in the hallway. He shook his pudgy head. "Lucky dog."

The next morning I caught my bus, the Shadyside Express in mass transit parlance, around the corner from my apartment. The bus ran along Walnut to Ivy, then followed Ellsworth, turned right on Bayard and right again at North Neville. At Centre, it descended a hill to the busway, a roadway open only to busses that ran through Skunk Hollow, the ravine that separates Bloomfield from Oakland and Shadyside.

No matter how often I traveled the busway, it never failed to fascinate me. It took less than ten minutes to travel from my cozy little gentrified neighborhood to the steel and glass edifices of the central business district. In between lay forlorn, trash-laden Skunk Hollow. The other passengers didn't seem to notice the low warehouses, the brewery, the litter strewn about the hills and along the railroad tracks. Instead, they occupied themselves with the magazines of their trades or reading books and newspapers. Some people chatted amongst themselves, though not often. Most stared blankly ahead as though they'd rather face a firing squad than endure another day at work. All were oblivious to the waste scattered along Skunk Hollow.

The variety and volume of trash along the route was amazing. There were porcelain toilets, hundreds of tires, dinette sets, deflated basketballs, enough bricks to build a Taj Mahal, baby carriages with broken wheels, claw footed

bathtubs, dozens of shopping carts. If you took an early morning bus, you could sometimes catch people dumping garbage down the hill from the backs of trucks. Coming home evenings, sheets of newspaper drifted along the roadway like tumbleweeds.

The garbage that people had dumped and thought was out of sight and out of mind, was laid out for all who rode on the busway to see. At one point along the route, a white liquid flowed from a pipe and streamed down the hill into an acrid little creek that ran along the railroad tracks. Often, riding home from work, I'd wonder who in City Hall had been bribed to ignore the illegal discharge of the liquid.

What caught my eye about the time of my interview at Rifkin, Sampson was a refrigerator that lay on a hillside, stripped of its doors. I thought it strange that someone thoughtless enough to throw a major appliance off the side of a hill would have taken the time to remove the doors for safety's sake.

I was also fascinated by my fellow mass transit riders. The same people rode the bus everyday. We were a small community in a sense, bound together by the ten minutes it took to travel downtown. There was a woman who wore a purple rain coat no matter the weather, and an old man who slept all the way into town. Sometimes he would snore, but when the bus came to his stop he'd wake and exit as though he hadn't been dozing at all.

A blue-suited man sat in the same seat every day reading the Wall Street Journal. An equally serious looking blue-suited man read The Hockey News just as intently as the broker read his Journal. There were the usual secretaries reading romance novels, wearing tennis shoes and pastel pants suits. The

business-suited women wore fancier running shoes, as though they planned to break into a sprint as soon as they exited the bus.

A plain woman with limp blonde hair read the Bible, moving her lips as she followed the text with her finger. She did not wear tennis shoes. My favorites, though, were the squirrel couple, a milquetoast pair who spoke in muted whispers and timidly held hands. They'd chatter, glance about the bus nervously, then resume their conversation.

Then there was the redhead who got on at Centre and Neville, the last stop before the busway. She always dressed in black and had long legs and a practiced, distracted look about her that would have served her well on any fashion runway in Paris – something between a smirk and the face you make when you catch a whiff of something funky. The businessmen would stare at her dressed in her black, they in their pinstripes and blue. Even the squirrel man stole glances at her as she sashayed her way down the aisle, his eyes following her ass until he felt the icy stare of his squirrel wife.

The morning of my interview, I was extremely nervous about meeting Rifkin. It was raining. When the redhead boarded the bus she was wearing sunglasses. Her immense black purse swayed with her hips as she walked down the aisle and took the empty seat next to mine. She glanced at me as she sat down and I think she smiled, but I was too nervous to notice. As the bus made its long descent to the busway, I turned and noticed the refrigerator lying on the hillside, open mouthed, gaping at the sky.

The redhead smelled of just a hint of perfume. I didn't look at her. I tried to concentrate on the smell of her perfume and tried forget the butterflies in my

stomach. I looked down at my shoes and stole a glance at her long, stockinged legs. Even her feet were beautiful. Unbelievable, beautiful feet! The other passengers looked at the two of us approvingly, as though they thought we made a fine couple. I averted my eyes and turned to her. She smiled politely. I felt my ears redden.

A lady sitting further behind us was talking about her cat and I tried to concentrate on what she was saying, but only caught bits and pieces. "And I asked him, is it kitty leukemia?" she said. "I couldn't have handled it if it was leukemia...so I said let me keep Boots at home so he can die a respectable kitty death..." As I listened to her go on about her cat, I wondered if the redhead had a cat. I decided she probably did.

Did Rifkin have a cat? No probably not. Perhaps he had a dog, some kind of big, nasty breed, a mastiff or a rotwiler – the kind they train to kill on command. I took a deep breath and tried to relax as the bus rounded a curve and the skyline of the city came into view, its spires looming ominously in the gray morning.

Rifkin had single-handedly broken unions and had built and dismantled oil and steel corporations. He had the distinction that few men have – public institutions named for him while he was still alive. He had buildings named for him and his money, and I was sitting there on the Shadyside Express wondering if he had a cat.

The bus stopped abruptly on Liberty Avenue and the redhead got off. The squirrel man watched her waltz down the aisle, his little wife glaring at him. The religious lady marked her place with a satin page mark and the brokers folded

their respective papers, slinging them under their arms. I straightened my tie, took a deep breath and tried to assume the air of a young man from the Mayor's office with a reputation, whatever the hell that meant. I got off at Fifth and Smithfield and headed to the address I'd written on a scrap of paper.

The firm's offices were nestled in the top three floors of one of the post-modern skyscrapers that dominate the Pittsburgh skyline. These steel and glass structures had sprouted up in the 1980s to reap quick profits in the then-booming real estate market. These new alcazars were the nouveau-riche of the architectural world. They dwarfed the monuments built by industrialists at the turn of the century to house their robber baron empires – Frick, Oliver, Mellon, Benedum – the oil and steel magnates of "old" Pittsburgh. Those venerable buildings had facades of marble and sandstone, named for the captains of industry who had built them. The new buildings were flashy, named for the development companies that had leveraged the money to finance their construction. They were called "centre" and "place" as though they were suburban shopping malls. Many of them housed upscale shops, pretentious boutiques and overpriced restaurants to shop and eat in while lawyers and CEOs feasted on the financial donnybrook of the 80s boom economy in the towers that rose above their tree-filled atriums.

Of course the 1980s were simply an unusually bullish blip in the course of economic history, and it ended soon enough. But the damage was done – the old Pittsburgh robber barons had been overshadowed. In '80s the corporate heroes, even in conservative Pittsburgh, had been the corporate raiders, the white knights and their associates. The old captains of industry, ruthless and deadly in their

time, were remembered for the libraries they'd funded and for the charitable foundations that bore their names.

As the recession of the late eighties hit, the new office plazas became monuments to the quick money made and lost by real estate developers, men with short term outlooks and heavy burdens of leveraged debt. Within ten years of their construction, these towering structures were foreclosed upon by banks or sold by their developers for pennies on the dollar in bankruptcy sales.

The "Centre" in which Rifkin, Sampson, Kelly & Wells had its offices was sheathed in stainless steel and tinted glass. The first three stories housed one of those atriums filled with upscale boutiques, the sort the average Pittsburgher could never afford to shop in.

As I exited on the forty-fifth floor and stepped into a reception area replete with marble floors and walnut paneling, I realized it was a long way from the corridors of City Hall. It also occurred to me that even when the economy was in recession, lawyers would continue to roll in the dough.

An aging, but still very attractive receptionist took my rain coat. She smiled. "Mr. Rifkin will be with you shortly," she informed me. I examined the surroundings. The art work was nondescript, abstract pieces mostly. They looked as though one of the partner's wives had painted them. I later learned that to be the case. Never underestimate lawyers.

The woodwork was of very high quality and without much flash. To the casual observer the decor said they were willing to pay for the best. Harried-looking associates rushed down a broad stairway, and office boys in shirt sleeves



scurried by, carrying files and stacks of books. The corridors I could see down were devoid of artwork and fancy trim.

A gray haired man walked swiftly down a corridor and stopped in front of me. His deeply tanned face was sharply contrasted by stark white hair combed almost into a pompadour. His face was deeply etched with wrinkles which made him look regal enough to be sculpted in marble and set in the middle of the lobby. A finely tailored gray pinstripe suit he had probably purchased in one of the stores in the building's lobby, neatly hugged his lean figure.

"Jacob?" He demanded.

"Mr. Rifkin," I said, standing to shake his hand. His grip was firm and he stared me deeply in the eye, holding his chin high, as though posing for a portrait. He carried himself like he knew he would soon be immortal, an icon, revered, adored by all who looked upon him. It was as if he just knew even more buildings would be named in his honor, his portrait hanging in their lobbies. He paused, as though affording me another opportunity to admire him before guiding me down a corridor with his hand on my shoulder. We walked in silence at a quick pace I took to be his usual and stopped in front of a set of double doors. He gestured for me to enter, ushering me into a conference room dominated by an enormous table encircled by high-backed leather chairs. The windows looked out on the Monongahela river and Mt. Washington. Two other men were already in the room seated midway along one side of the table.

"Mr. Sampson," Rifkin said, gesturing to a portly old man with a few thin wisps of gray hair on his head. The old man nodded. "Mr. Wells," Rifkin said, gesturing to the other man, whose face and hands were dotted with liver spots.

Neither man stood. Rifkin motioned for me to take a seat across from him as he sat between them, holding his head high as he always would. I leaned across the table and shook the frail mens' hands.

"As you may have read in the papers," Rifkin started as I took my seat, "our firm has been affected by a series of setbacks that have led to the removal of several partners, our firm administrator, and an unfortunate reduction in staff. Obviously, the image of this firm has suffered severely, Jacob."

"I have no experience..." I started.

"The paralegal work you will be performing does not require any formal training," he replied.

"I'm sorry, but I have no idea of what a paralegal even does."

"Oh, it's rather simple stuff. Most of the girls we have here at Rifkin, Sampson don't even have bachelors degrees. A trained monkey could handle it. That isn't important. What is important is that you are well respected around town and we would like to use you here. I have already had the necessary papers drawn up. You should find the terms more than satisfactory."

"I'm really not sure..."

"We'd like to have you on our team," he said, smiling artificially. "Now, Mr. Sampson and Mr. Wells have previous engagements." Wells and Sampson nodded and stood up. Sampson grasped Wells' arm and together they shuffled toward the door which Rifkin held open for them.

Once he shut the door behind them, he shook his head. "It is very hard to watch friends deteriorate like that. I think we had thought we'd have retired by now, but there never seems to be a right time." He paused again, then continued

on as solid as ever. "I hope you'll agree to join us. I went to the University of Pennsylvania with your grandfather. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't," I replied.

"He was a few years ahead of me. He was quite a pirate," he smiled genuinely for a moment. "He sold me the answers to a Latin test once. Even then, he was a go-getter. I greatly felt the loss when he died."

"He was quite a man," I said, stung by the image of my gray-haired grandfather selling test answers as an undergraduate.

"Now," he said as he stood and walked to the window, "I have done things in my career that I am not proud of to get where I am today. I hold no qualms about that, but I take great exception to deceit, especially deceit on the part of my own partners. I can not tolerate it. Your grandfather did not, and I do not think you do either."

I felt I should have said something. I'd hardly uttered a word and felt the interview slipping away. At the same time, though, it seemed to be moving toward an inevitable conclusion.

"I've read your report to the Mayor," Rifkin continued. "I have personally spoken with him about you. I know everything about you. I know and respect your father. I know your personal history, your school history. I know how you performed in your capacity with the Mayor's task force. Jacob," he paused for effect, looking me in the eye sympathetically. "I know of your disappointment with the leniency given to the men you cited for improprieties. This position could provide you the opportunity to forge a meaningful reputation as a problem solver. You could write your own ticket from here. It would be an excellent

introduction to the law. You could have superb references to any law school in the country if you wished, or we could keep that firm administrator position open..." He stopped and took a manila envelope from a credenza and handed it to me. "These are our terms. As I said, you should find them satisfactory."

"I don't understand..."

"This firm needs a good housecleaning," he said. "You are to be the maid. You will report only to me. I have invested my entire life in this firm. It is my second wife if you will. This," he motioned with his hands, "is my accomplishment. And I'll be damned if some young conniving sons-of-bitches are going to destroy all I've worked to build." He stopped and cleared his throat.

"Now, if you will excuse me, I have business to tend to. I will send Jeffrey Kilmer from support services in to give you a quick tour." With that he left. I was alone in the conference room. The sun glinted off the enormous conference table. I walked to the windows and watched the muddy Monongahela as it roiled on its relentless course, flowing by the city on its confluence with the Allegheny to form the Ohio, and continue on to the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico.

I opened the manila envelope and examined the single sheet of paper it contained. On it was written a salary and benefits package with a total value typed at the bottom right hand corner of the page. I could have said no, but I didn't. I was to be the highest paid maid in Pittsburgh.

## CH 2

Two days after Rifkin "offered" me the position, I went to work reviewing a pile of legal documents in an out-of-the-way office on the forty-seventh floor. Sequestered in my windowless cubby hole, I began to pore over volumes of complicated legal documents. With some difficulty, I began to gain an understanding of the firm's troubles. For the most part, the documents were written in legalese, a distant cousin of the English language, which made my task even more arduous. And though what I was able to understand about the situation is rather complicated, I'll try to give you an abridged account.

In the midst of the financial feeding frenzy of the 1980s, corporations from TWA to CBS were devoured in hostile takeovers, leveraged in complex financing schemes masterminded by corporate raiders. Simply put, the raiders raised a whole boatload of money by floating worthless "junk" bonds to finance their takeovers. The country was swept up in a frenzy of these mergers and acquisitions, and even the most stolid old firms of Pittsburgh were not immune. Gulf Oil, an old cornerstone of the Pittsburgh business community and one of the world's largest oil multinationals, agreed to be acquired by Chevron, a so-called white knight, rather than succumb to a hostile takeover by the corporate raider T. Boone Pickens. While some Pittsburgh firms found themselves the targets of takeovers, others were busy preying upon other companies.

In all of this craziness, one of Rifkin, Sampson's oldest clients, Pittsburgh-Gorman Industries, (formerly Pittsburgh-Gorman Steel) found itself the target of

the British corporate raider, Sir William McAlister. McAlister's usual strategy was to buy a stake in a company, oust the board of directors and take control of the company without ever having to buy a majority interest.

When McAlister made his bid to buy Pittsburgh-Gorman, the company's management asked Rifkin, Sampson to fashion a defense. And it was the defense tactics and additional actions that were disclosed during an investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission, that landed the firm in deep shit.

When McAlister took over a company, he relied on high-risk junk bonds to finance the acquisition of the huge chunks of the company's stock. To pay off the enormous debt he amassed, he would raid the company pension fund for cash and sell off parts of the enterprise, keeping only the most profitable parts of the company.

Usually companies experiencing difficult times found themselves the target of a takeover, and though Pittsburgh-Gorman had had a long and proud history, it had fallen on hard times due to the steady decline of the American steel industry and years of mediocre management.

The analysts had agreed that if McAlister gained control of Gorman, he would sell off some of the less attractive pieces of real estate, a steel mill or two, and its manufacturing subsidiaries, and hold onto the plum real estate properties, the oil and gas leases, the timber rights and the remaining steel concerns.

The challenge the Rifkin, Sampson lawyers faced at the time of McAlister's raid was to devise a means to block the takeover. Ultimately, the legal maneuvers employed by the lead attorneys in the defense, Daniel Harrington and Edward Blanton, were unsuccessful and McAlister took control of the

company. And because the tactics used in the defense of Gorman left many of the involved parties badly bloodied, both McAlister and the Gorman family sued, and the SEC initiated its investigation.

It took me most of my first week to begin to gain a grasp of the basic issues. My task was complicated by a steady stream of interruptions from curious partners who stuck their heads in my office to see what I was up to. Worse even were the associates, paralegals and secretaries sent by their bosses to dig up any dirt they could about what I was up to. I decided not to introduce myself around the office or engage anyone in conversation for the first few weeks. When someone popped his or her head in my door, I wouldn't raise my head until he or she spoke, and would put down my reading only long enough to shake a hand, never rising from my chair. The more timid the interloper, the longer I'd make them wait. Some would linger for minutes before knocking lightly on the door or clearing their throats. Others were too timid even to do that and would just slink away instead.

The only one I welcomed was Kilmer, the head of support services, the head copy boy. If you want to know what is going on in a law firm, just ask the copy boys. But even the hired help has its own agenda so I kept my guard up when Kilmer sauntered into my office one afternoon early in my second week on the job.

"The old guys must be paying you a lot to do whatever it is you're doing," he said, as he walked in uninvited.

"The pay's okay," I lied.

"Better than okay," he said, smiling knowingly. He leaned against the door frame. He was dressed in a reasonably well tailored conservative suit. If you hadn't known better, you might have mistaken him for a young associate in the firm rather than the head copy boy. He was beginning to go bald, which he tried to conceal by combing his fine brown hair across his head in a maneuver known as "the sweep." As ridiculous as the sweep is, it is a popular maneuver among lawyers, even those at Rifkin, Sampson. Along with the sweep, Kilmer had the same whitish pale complexion as the associates who worked fourteen hours a day had. What set him apart though was the twinkle in his eye. While the associates, worker drones in the legal word, had that exhausted, beaten down look about them, Kilmer breezed about the office as though the whole thing was a fascinating game and he couldn't wait to see how it turned out.

His appearance was studied. Nothing was out of place, except for his shoes. Most of the attorneys at the firm favored fine wing-tips, but as the head copy boy Kilmer couldn't afford two hundred dollar a pair shoes. His were a game facsimile but they gave him away none the less.

"So, I figure they brought you in to do some sniffing around," he said casually, picking a piece of lint from his jacket

"I'll be doing paralegal work mostly."

"You have no experience, I've seen your resume," he stated, examining his fingernails.

"You have?"



"I know my way around this place better than anyone else," he said. " I could help you. If Rifkin's your only source of information, you're only going to see what he wants you to see, right?"

"When do you get a chance to read Rifkin's memos?" I asked.

"What?" he asked, feigning ignorance.

"Or was it my resume the Mayor's office faxed Rifkin?"

He smiled.

"Or perhaps you made the trip personally when Rifkin requested a messenger to go to City Hall," I suggested.

"I like you," Kilmer said. "We're a lot alike."

"Don't flatter me," I replied.

He chuckled.

"Give me a low down of the place. Starting with her," I said, pointing to the office across the hall that was occupied by a blonde who didn't look anything like an attorney.

"Lacey Jordan, the firm recruiter," he said, dropping the cool, disinterested routine. "Word is she's had some late night liaisons with a couple of the attorneys. Only partners though, no associates. She'll do anything to make her way up the ladder. Anything. Rumor has it she's rather fond of fellat..."

He stopped. Seconds later Lacy strolled by, warily eyeing us before closing her office door. Kilmer smiled.

"Fellatio," he said, finishing his sentence.

"How'd you know she was in the hall?"

"It's a talent of mine. Call it a sixth sense. Anyway, Lacey moved to that office because an associate was asked to 'quit' the firm the day you started."

"Interesting."

"Yeah," he said. "Makes you wonder why she still has a job, considering the firm's been laying people off, not hiring."

"Now as far as secretaries go," he continued, "they fall into two categories. The first is the nail and hair spray set – young chicks with big hair and lots of make-up. Some of them are sweet. A lot of them flirt, but most either want to land a lawyer or they date long-haired, muscle bound hunkies who drive Camaros."

"The second category is the old standards – old biddies who've been with the firm since the dawn of time. Some of them are downright bitter. Avoid them at all costs. Some of the nostalgic ones can be charming. Of course the black ones are good to you if you're good to them. But you know how they are."

"No, I don't," I said curtly.

"Whatever," he said. "Anyway, you're young and handsome. You might get laid."

"Thanks, but I'm more interested in the job at hand."

"You don't want to get laid?"

"You're not my type, Kilmer," I said. "Now what's the deal with Blant...Blanstein?"

"Blanton. Blanton's one of the executive committee's problems," he said, shaking his head as though Blanton was his problem too. "More like the monster they created. He's one of those tough guys from one of those steel towns along

the river. He put himself through college working summers in a steel mill in Aliquippa. He was first in his class at Pitt Law and clerked at the firm for three summers in a row. The firm paid for business school after that. At the age of twenty-six he had a JD/MBA and was the highest paid first year associate in firm history. He made partner at thirty-two. By the time he was forty, he had a corner office, a rambling estate up in North Hills somewhere, three kids, and a wife who was as happy to have him out of the house as have him around. I don't have to tell you about the Gorman case," he said, pointing to the boxes of files stacked beside my desk. "That you can figure out for yourself."

"How about this McQuoid and..." I picked up a file trying to find the name of a firm that had come up in my reading.

"McQuoid & Reed was another Blanton client, a New York merchant banking firm that was setting up phony Pacific rim real estate ventures. Two McQuoid & Reed principals, Sanford and White, were named in an indictment handed down in New York implicating them as the two major conspirators in a fraud scheme. Blanton wasn't directly implicated but he is under investigation by the SEC. Blanton tried to assure the executive committee that the bond issues he'd drafted for McQuoid & Reed were above board and that he had nothing to do with the real estate ventures. But it still doesn't look good."

"But Blanton was indicted," I said.

"As the saying goes – you can indict a ham sandwich," he replied.

"Unfortunately for him, his deli platter, Sanford and White, skipped the country. Word is they're laying low in the Caribbean somewhere – lounging in swimming

pools on enormous estates, and Blanton's about to lose everything. Anyway," he said, pointing at the boxes, "it's all in the files."

"If all that's public knowledge what do you think Rifkin wants out of me?" I asked.

Kilmer shrugged his shoulders and turned to leave.

"I'm sure you'll figure something out," he said, flashing a smile before heading down the corridor.

As soon as he was gone, Lacey Jordan opened her door and peered down the hallway. She crossed the hall and leaned against the door frame, her arms crossed across her chest.

She was quite striking with long blonde hair that fell in ringlets about her shoulders. Her somewhat hard, lean face was quick to convey either full disdain or grudging approval. Her wardrobe seemed to have been chosen solely to provoke – high heels, suits with short skirts, often with a blazer without a blouse underneath. She was also known to sport a leather skirt which was popular among the men in the office. Despite her habiliment, she didn't necessarily come across as an exhibitionist. It seemed more like a cry for attention, respect maybe. But as hard as she tried, she would never be accepted as an equal, even among the few female attorneys in the firm. And you could tell that ate away at her.

"That little shit Kilmer told you I was sleeping with someone to keep my job, didn't he?" she asked.

"You seem to know him well," I replied.

"I know him all right," she said as though she had a bad taste in her mouth. "You know, you're not going to get much information out of people around here. Everyone thinks you're Rifkin's hatchet man."

"Well on that point, you and Kilmer seem to agree."

"Kilmer is scum, but he is astute," she said. "Work around lawyers long enough and you'll learn one isn't exclusive of the other."

"How about firm recruiters?"

She laughed. Her laugh was surprisingly girlish.

"You've forgotten. According to Kilmer, I've slept my way to job security."

"Hmm," I murmured. "But you're intelligent. I'm sure you hold your own with these guys."

"Hey," she said with practiced nonchalance, "you use your assets."

"As long as it doesn't keep you up at night," I said.

"I'm not going to tell you what keeps me up at night," she replied. "But the fact remains – you're going to run up against some mighty tight lips around here."

"I dunno."

She just let out a little laugh, and shook her curly mane.

"Good luck, Jacob Gold," she said, turning, sashaying her way down the hall, shaking her head.

I spent the rest of the afternoon reading files and going over everything people had told me – about the firm, Gorman-Pittsburgh, Blanton's Pacific real

estate deal. It was all too much – too many names, dates, facts, figures. I was beginning to lose the forest for the trees. I must have been sitting at my desk for a long time, thinking about everything and nothing at the same time, when I noticed Rifkin standing just inside the door to my office. I nearly fell out of my chair.

"You look lost in thought, son," he said, almost affably.

"I don't think I've gotten a good grasp of everything yet," I replied.

"Oh, you've done a fine job so far," he replied, poo-pooing my concern with a flick of his wrist.

"I don't feel I've done anything..."

"I've had more than a few nervous inquiries from attorneys," he said.

"You can scare some of the people some of the time, and that is sufficient."

"And that's my job?" I asked.

"Not entirely, but..."

"But what?"

"But that is one of the primary reasons for your being here," he said, trying to look as regally mischievous as possible.

"Is this going to be another discussion of my so-called reputation?" I asked.

"There is nothing wrong with having a reputation for shaking things up," he said. "There's nothing wrong with being known as an agitator. It is your moniker, your calling card."

"I don't think I'm terribly thrilled with having a calling card like that."

"You can turn a reputation to great advantage," he said. "You scared the bejesus out of several important people at City Hall, and now you find yourself with us. That is how it works."

"I thought the people of Rifkin, Sampson would be thick-skinned enough to take the heat," I replied.

"They are human, that's all," he said shutting the door behind him. He sat heavily and cupped his hands before him like an opera diva. I half expected him to break into an aria. "The partners at Rifkin, Sampson are tough fighters. When they feel backed into a corner they rise to the occasion. I would expect nothing less. Fear can be a great asset to a fighter, it makes him that much tougher, but it can also leave him vulnerable. His drive to eliminate that which he fears can blind him to unseen counter attacks. Provoke their fear, Jacob. Leave the counter attack to me."

"And who do you plan to cut down to size?" I asked.

"Anyone who gets in my way," he replied.

"In the way of what, may I ask?"

"Excuse me?"

"Let me put it even more bluntly," I said. "What do you want?"

He looked at me as though I was an ignorant child.

"What do I want?" he asked. "My only concern is to ensure that my reputation and the integrity of the firm are maintained, no matter the cost. In the end that is all a man has, Jacob. No one remembers the loser. Only upon the victor are the laurels bestowed."

"So my job, if I am to understand you, is to do whatever you ask of me so that you can..." I waited to allow him to finish my sentence.

"So that I may guide the firm through these troubles with my dignity intact, and with my name on the door."

"And what If I don't do your bidding?"

"But you already are," he said.

"But, for the sake of argument, say I decide I've had enough?" I asked.

"Then I will make sure that everyone in town knows that you are a dishonorable young man." He sat up resting his elbows on his knees. "You are aware, aren't you, Jake, that many men in this town felt your grandfather was let down when your father chose to practice in estates and trusts rather than becoming a litigator. Some thought it wrong that the son did not display the ferocity of the father."

"They had their differences," I replied. "In the end they found a common ground."

"I know," he replied offhandedly.

"Then why bring it up?"

"Because, even now, there are those who still talk about it, and they talk about it when they talk about you. They wonder if the grandson is a fighter like the grandfather or..."

"Oh for Christ's sake..."

"Don't get upset, Jacob. I'm only repeating what people are saying. And they are saying it. Perhaps even you have wondered..."



He appeared to consider something for a moment then pulled an envelope from the inside breast pocket of his suit jacket. "This is for the work you have done so far. It has already been transferred to your bank account..."

"I never signed on to..."

"Did you sign anything when you started here?" he asserted.

"No."

"And am I not paying your salary?"

"Yes."

"Then let's make a deal," he said. "Continue to do your work, and I will continue to pay your salary plus bonuses, and I will see to it that everyone in this town thinks you're the sharpest son-of-a-gun since your grandfather lorded over Grant street. Okay?"

"And if I don't. What will happen? You'll claim I forced you to make deposits into my account?"

"I'll sue for breach of contract," he replied.

"I never signed anything."

"Oral contract." He smiled. "Come now Jacob, you could never make a case for yourself. Let's be reasonable. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. And," he added calmly, "you have no choice." With that he stood and left.

I opened the envelope he'd placed on my desk. It was a general letter of agreement stating that I would draw a "consulting fee" in addition to my regular salary for services rendered.

I was tired, feeling cornered, so when Phil Hendricks, my pal from City Hall called to see how I was doing now that I'd made the big time, I gladly took his call. Worse yet, in a momentary lapse of judgment, I allowed him to set me up on that blind date with his cousin, because, let's face it, I was feeling lonely.

I didn't think he'd act so quickly on the offer, but he called right back and said it was all arranged. Her name was Jenna. We would meet at five-thirty that evening in front of the steel building where she had a business call.

When built in 1963, the U.S. Steel building represented the very biggest big business. Still the tallest building in town, in the '90s it had been sold and quietly rechristened '600 Grant Street' by the new owners. Despite this new identity, most Pittsburghers still referred to it as 'the steel building,' or just pointed a thumb in its direction and said, 'steel.'

So late in the afternoon I strolled down Grant Street, enjoying a rare sunny spring day despite my dejection, watching the sun play off the buildings of the street. I made it there a couple of minutes early. When I'd asked how I'd recognize her, Hendricks said she'd be carrying a large artist's portfolio. I'd watched the bank of revolving doors hoping to pick her out of the crowd before she recognized me, so I could bail out if I wanted to. But because of the size of her portfolio she couldn't use a revolving door. She'd used a side door instead.

I heard someone call my name with a hint of irony, and I turned around to find myself facing the redhead from the bus. I tried to hide my pleasure, but I must not have been very successful because she laughed. "I know," she said. We stared at each other for a moment before she broke the silence.

"It must be our lucky day," she said. "Come on." She motioned with a nod of her head and said she wanted to show me something. I followed her across Grant Street to the Gulf building. The art deco gem was one of the city's largest buildings, but it was virtually abandoned as a result of the fall of Gulf Oil in its mega-merger with Chevron.

Our footfalls echoed as we strode across the marble floor of the cavernous lobby. The security guard at the desk recognized her and pulled a key from a drawer which he handed to her, as though it was an everyday occurrence.

We made our way to an elevator bank that was cordoned off and she put the key in the control panel. The doors of one of the elevators opened and she repeated the maneuver with the key in the elevator control panel, which lit up like a Christmas tree. The overhead light flickered on and she pushed a the button for one of the top floors. The doors closed. I couldn't keep my eyes off her. Her skin was so white it was almost translucent. The veins on her forearm were a muted turquoise. Her lipstick was a deep, blood red. Her eyes were piercing green. She smiled when she caught me staring at her, but I couldn't look away. She was beautiful.

When we exited it was as though we'd stepped fifty years back in time. The place looked as it must have when the building first opened during the depression. It was like walking onto the set of a Cary Grant film. The floors were linoleum, and each office had a ten-foot-tall door with a frosted pane of glass on which the names and titles of the occupants were painted in block letters – men who very well could have been ten years in the grave.

I followed her, wondering what we could possibly be doing up there, seemingly transported back in time. We meandered down a series of corridors, through doors, anterooms and dusty offices, like time traveling explorers, until we came to an empty office. The windows had been completely painted over except for a single circle about six inches in diameter a few feet above eye level. Late afternoon sun streamed through the aperture, throwing a beam of light across the room, illuminating dust motes that floated silently through the shaft of light.

She took off her heels and stepped onto a folding chair set beneath the window, then looked out the aperture in the glass. She motioned for me to join her, without taking her eyes from whatever it was she was looking at. With some difficulty, I balanced on the chair next to her and put my eye to the window. A few feet away, perched on a granite ledge was a majestic bird.

"That's Natasha," she said. She then pointed to another outcrop where a slightly smaller bird perched. "And that's her nestmate Boris. They're peregrine falcons."

Boris must have seen something because he abandoned his perch and dove from view. Natasha did the same. Jenna jumped from the chair and raced out the door. I followed. She grabbed her purse in mid-stride and ran across the hall to an office where she opened the blinds. From the window we could see the two birds soaring and diving, negotiating the updrafts among the towering office buildings. The sun illuminated the art deco facade of the Koppers building across the street. Parts of the steel exoskeleton of the Steel building were illuminated, while others were thrown in deep shadow. When the birds raced through the

pockets of sunlight, their wings were illuminated, each feather touched with golden light.

Jenna sighed and smiled. "They're something aren't they?" I just nodded. From her purse she pulled a pint of Scotch and two plastic glasses covered with plastic lids and filled with ice. She motioned for me to pour and I laughed out loud. When I handed her her drink, she held it high and toasted her uncle Phil. I did likewise, unable to take my eyes from her.

About a year later, we saw a retrospective of the paintings of Edward Hopper in New York. In the show were several paintings of solitary figures seated in offices much like the one in which we sat that afternoon. That is how I like to remember Jenna – like a subject in a Hopper painting, solemnly sitting in an office, beautiful, ephemeral, as though she might disappear at any moment.

"Peregrines are raptors," she said, swirling the Scotch around her cup. "They usually take their prey in midair. They'll take sparrows, but pigeons have more meat on them," she informed me in a distractedly scientific voice. It was a voice that I knew I could fall deeply for.

And so we stood there at the window, drinking Scotch, watching the birds soaring through alternating sun and shadow through the canyons of the city. I forgot about the ever deepening hole I was falling into at the firm. The birds danced on the air, diving and swooping out of sight, then reappearing again, as though they were putting on an aerial display for us.

Jenna pointed to a pigeon flying several flights below, and one of the falcons dove toward the unsuspecting bird, swiping it out of the air. In an instant, all that remained was a puff of feathers that floated toward the unseen street

below. Any pedestrian that may have noticed the feathers floating from the sky would never have guessed at the drama that had just occurred high above.

The falcon alit on a ledge in front of us, landing heavily, breaking the pigeon's neck. We watched in silence as it began pulling flesh from the freshly dead bird. Alone together in the silence of the late afternoon sunshine, we watched, transfixed as the falcon tugged organs from the pigeon and wrenched flesh from the carcass, its beak reddened with blood. Finally, Jenna threw back the rest of her Scotch.

"I'm hungry," she said. "Buy me dinner?"

How could I refuse?

### CH 3

When I was young, my father hung a bird feeder from a tree outside the kitchen window so my mother could watch the birds while she prepared meals. The feeder attracted a lot of birds, but the squirrels soon discovered it and ate all the seed. So my father devised a shield to keep the squirrel from climbing onto the feeder. Initially, it was successful, but eventually the squirrels learned how to bypass it and raid the feeder anyway.

In a similar manner, the barriers the Rifkin, Sampson attorneys used in the defense of Gorman-Pittsburgh were initially successful, but in the long run, they couldn't keep Sir William McAlister from taking over the company.

Edward Blanton took the brunt of the criticism for the failed defense, but it was actually the other lead attorney, Daniel Harrington, who had devised the strategy. Just after Gorman fell to McAlister, Harrington left the firm to start his

own firm, taking one partner and eight associates with him in the process. What I couldn't understand was why Harrington was only given passing mention in the lawsuits filed against the firm by McAlister and the Gorman family trusts. He got off pretty lightly, considering it was his plan that led to the fall of the company.

In the battle to save Gorman, the most important tactic used was a device known as the "the poison pill." The notion of a poison pill that could kill a raider's hostile play for a company was conceived in the early '80s, by a New York lawyer, of course. The pill was designed to place expensive barriers in the raider's path, making the cost of acquiring the company prohibitive.

Companies that adopted poison pill provisions usually supplanted them with other defense tactics known as "shark repellents." The problem with the poison pill and some of the associated shark repellents was that their legality was questionable, at best. Raiders maintained that they defied the notion that shareholders have the right to sell their shares to anyone who may offer an attractive price. That, after all, they argued, that is the basis of the free market system. Despite their questionable legality, Harrington and Blanton incorporated the poison pill and all the shark repellents they could muster because courts throughout the country were contradicting one another as cases were heard.

According to their notes (which were in the files in my office) Harrington and Blanton had felt that by the time the courts finally resolved the poison pill constitutionality question, McAlister would have tired of the chase and turned his sights toward easier quarry. They were wrong. The Delaware State Supreme Court passed down a ruling that effectively said poison pills like those Gorman had adopted were illegal.

Not long after the Delaware ruling, McAlister made an offer to take the whole company private. He asked to see Gorman's books in a process known as "due diligence," which allowed his financial people to assess the value of the company so he could make an offer. Harrington and Blanton advised Gorman's management to stall due diligence as much as possible, and let them handle the legal issues.

McAlister was able to negotiate that hurdle as well and finally made an offer that both management and the shareholders accepted. Thus the squirrel was able to gorge himself at the bird feeder.

As I began to understand the details of the Gorman case, I also started to gain insight into the organizational dynamics of the firm and how it was affected by the loss of Gorman. McAlister's raid on Gorman had been played out not only in the courts, but also in the media – The Wall Street Journal, Business Week, even network news gave it coverage.

Harrington's desertion was followed by a rash of layoffs of support staff, more defections of partners and associates, and the firing of the firm administrator. From a height of 125 lawyers just two years earlier, there were just 67 attorneys by the time I started there. The few attorneys I had approached evaded my questions, while others avoided me all together. A few would actually change direction when they saw me coming down the corridor or shut the door to their offices when I walked by.

By the beginning of the fourth week I spotted my quarry – Stuart Goldfarb, a brilliant young partner in the tax section whose ambition was his



Achilles heel. Something of a boy genius, Goldfarb had successfully defended another major Rifkin, Sampson client, not by imitating the tactics of New York lawyers but by using the tax law to the client's advantage, staving off a hostile proxy maneuver.

As smart as he was, he thirsted for more. More correctly, I should say his wife's overarching ambition for him made him thirsty. Stuart Goldfarb was one of those guys who was almost too congenial, like one of those yippy dogs that are always eager for attention. His wife, on the other hand was one of the most horribly pushy and arrogant women in Pittsburgh.

A former New Jersey beauty queen, she was said to possess the looks of Cleopatra and the grace of Field Marshall Rommel. Despite her attempts to infuse something resembling a backbone into her husband, he maintained his grace but was haunted by his dear wife's ambition for him. As a result, his allegiance went to anyone who could keep him in the hunt for a position in the firm's executive committee. Since I'd been with the firm he'd treaded lightly around me, but I could tell he was dying to get the inside scoop on who stood where.

I approached him in his own territory, a dim hallway on the 47th floor occupied by the tax group. He seemed to be waiting for me, standing in the doorway of his office. He dug something out of a back molar with his tongue and looked down at the floor.

"I'm not sure I can help, but..."

I smiled reassuringly.

"Well," he said, gesturing for me to enter his office and take a seat. He stopped. "Should I close the door?"

"If you think you should," I replied.

He hesitated, then peered across the corridor and shut the door. He was one of those thin little men with a baby face and shaggy hair piled on top of his head as though a furry little rodent had taken up residence there. His large tortoise shell glasses completed the look of a boy genius grown up and starting to go gray.

"The skinny around here is that you really don't need to ask what all of this is about," he said. "The guys in litigation think you're with the Securities and Exchange Commission."

"I can't even balance my checkbook half the time," I said. "The SEC wouldn't touch me with a ten foot pole."

"Speaking of ten foot poles..."

"Speaking of ten foot poles," I interrupted, "no one seems to be very eager to tell me what's going on here and it's pissing me off."

Goldfarb raised his eyebrows.

I sighed. "Sorry, it's just I've been having a hell of a time with this." I paused to gauge his reaction.

He had that pathetic look of being the poor schmuck who opened his mouth when everyone else kept mum. He needed to know what I'd found out so far. He knew he'd have to give me something. I knew I had my mark as soon as he looked at me. He had the look of a dog that hadn't been fed for days.

"Whadda you need to know Jake?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"Well, I need to get a better understanding of Gorman," I said.

"It wasn't that bad a screw-up," he said. "The Gorman family trusts, who still controlled a large chunk of the company's stock claim the firm didn't act in the best interest of the company – that our legal advice was shoddy. The fact of the matter is, it wasn't all that bad. Harrington and Blanton did what was, at the time, what any other counsel to a company fighting off a raider would do – try anything possible to block the takeover."

"The Gorman family was willing to do anything to fend off McAlister," I said. "Then they sue, saying the firm did too much. Aren't they contradicting themselves?"

"The market drove the company's stock price up on speculation of the outcome of the takeover. At first, the stock price skyrocketed because arbitrageurs started snapping up Gorman stock."

"But then the price fell as the company stalled McAlister on the advice of Harrington and Blanton," I said.

"You've got it," Goldfarb said. "The family claims the firm's advice cost them millions."

"But McAlister claims Harrington and Blanton's tactics cost him money too, right?"

"McAlister claims the firm advised the company to adopt the stalling maneuvers, even though they knew they were illegal. He says that cost him millions, even though the stall in due diligence actually saved him some money on the back end."

"Does he have a chance?" I asked. "After all, the pill was shot down in Delaware well after Gorman adopted it."

"McAlister seems to think he can recover. But the onus falls upon him, and the Gormans for that matter, to prove that the firm acted outside the law."

"So if the firm's in good shape, why's everyone so down in the mouth?"

"Reputation," he said, "Image is everything."

"And what about Harrington?"

"He was acting as an agent of the Firm. Once he left, he was free and clear of all liability."

"What about Blanton then?"

"He's gonna end up alone on this one. He makes the perfect fall guy if you think about it – he's got Gorman plus his real estate scandal going."

"And Harrington?"

"McAlister's hinted he might go after Harrington before all's said and done."

"And in the meantime..."

"In the meantime, Harrington is open for business. Look, no matter what's in fashion in the business world – mergers and acquisitions, bankruptcy, corporate restructuring – there's always work for attorneys."

"What makes Harrington such an untouchable?" I asked.

"I don't know. Jake," he replied. "Maybe you should ask him yourself."

"Do you think that's smart?"

"It's your job to find out where the bodies are, isn't it?"

"Maybe," I replied, smiling.

"And what have you found out so far?"

"All in all..."

"Yes?"

"I'd rather be in Philadelphia."

Goldfarb laughed and wished me well with that "you're fucked" affable look on his face.

The next morning I slept in and missed my bus, and was forced to take the 7:30. The busses on the Shadyside Express have to be the oldest, smelliest busses in the fleet. And the thing about it is that the passengers on that route, without a doubt, have the highest median income of any riders in the whole system. Lawyers, brokers, bankers, you name it, they ride the Shadyside. And the express is unbeatable if you think about it. From the tree lined streets of Shadyside to downtown in about twelve minutes for a buck-twenty five – handy when you wake up late with a hangover and have to make it to work on time.

That morning I was cursing the Port Authority for its smelly busses with broken air conditioners. It was a warm, muggy morning – the first of what would prove many heat waves that season. A lady sitting in the extreme back of the bus had her purse open and was putting on her makeup. I watched her and decided there is something inappropriate about doing your makeup in public.

By the time I'd caught the bus, she'd already applied base and was putting on eyeliner. She looked in a pocket mirror, carefully penciling a dark line on her lower eyelid, her mouth open like a lizard waiting for an insect to fly by. I guess she was in her early forties, librarianish in appearance, neat, pinched. I watched

as she applied rouge and put on eye shadow with a small swab. By the time she was pursing her newly painted lips, the bus came to a halt at Jenna's stop. It was unnerving not to see her walk down the aisle with that walk of hers. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine her applying makeup in front of a mirror and decided it had to be one of the more sensual acts I could ever hope to witness.

But Jenna didn't get on at her stop and had probably wondered where I was when she caught the 7:15 and I wasn't there. Anyway, the lady in the back of the bus had put her makeup back into her purse and was gazing at the scenery as we descended the ramp to the busway. Her expression changed from one of passing interest to a mask of horror.

"Oh, my god," she gasped. "Oh my god! Stop the bus, stop the bus!" she shrieked. The driver slammed on the brakes, and turned in his seat to see what was going on.

"I think there's a...a body in that refrigerator down there."

Someone gasped and the passengers sitting on my side of the bus crossed the aisle to look. Someone asked where and the make-up lady pointed to the junked refrigerator I'd noticed weeks before. In the appliance's leaf-filled compartments were what looked like an arm, two legs and a torso.

"Oh my god, it's been butchered...," a lady said.

I strained to see the refrigerator through the trees. "It's a mannequin," I said.

"For god's sake," a blue suited man bellowed.

"Yes, I suppose it is," another said, as though disappointed it wasn't an actual body.

The driver, who had walked out onto the ramp, boarded the bus and reported it was just a mannequin. About two dozen pairs of eyes scowled at the woman.

"I'm so..." she said, holding her hands over her heart. "I'm so sorry." And I realized she reminded me of one of those hysterical characters in Hitchcock movies who have to be slapped across the face to be brought back to their senses.

I called Harrington's office when I finally got to work. He was in a meeting, but I spoke to his secretary and told her I was interested in meeting with him. There was a pause when I told her he could reach me at Rifkin, Sampson.

As I hung up the phone I noticed the shadow of someone standing just beyond my line of sight in the hallway. Perhaps Kilmer's sixth sense had rubbed off on me.

"Yes?" I called out.

Lacey Jordan stepped into the doorway.

"Excuse me?" she said, feigning ignorance.

"Did you need something?" I asked.

She bit her lip and paused for a moment. She was wearing the infamous leather skirt and had her hair pulled into a bun that made her look like a curious cross between a dominatrix and a grade school librarian.

"I just," she paused. "I couldn't help overhear you call Harrington. I've heard a lot of things the guys have said about you..."

"And?"

"And I don't think you know who you're dealing with here."

"No?"

"No." She stepped into my office and shut the door. "These guys play hardball, and you coming in here and snooping around doesn't look good. This place is like a sorority. You wouldn't believe quickly these guys turn into a bunch of gossiping coeds. Nothing goes unnoticed."

"What have they been noticing?" I asked.

"They don't trust Rifkin and they don't trust you. Word has it that Blanton has something on Rifkin, that's why he hasn't been fired."

"Blackmail?"

"Either that or they've cut a deal," she said.

"A deal? Come on."

"I'm serious." She sat down in the chair across from my desk and smoothed her skirt. She'd left several buttons of her blouse undone.

"Tell me, if everyone's so worried about me, why hasn't anyone cast any lines my way?" I asked.

"Someone already has," she replied. "Goldfarb."

"And on which side does he fall?"

She leaned closer.

"There's a group of partners who think it's time someone else took control. They're tired of Rifkin's shenanigans."

"And you're saying Goldfarb is one of them?" I asked.

"Yes," she insisted, whispering.

"And what's this all mean to me?" I asked.



"If they think you're Rifkin's man, they'll screw you at every turn," she said.

"And what do you want out of all of this?" I asked.

"Me?"

"You."

She smiled and leaned across the desk so I could see down her blouse.

"I dunno," she said. "What do you want?"

The intercom buzzed and I picked up the phone. Rifkin's secretary told me he wanted to see me in his office immediately.

"Saved by the bell," I said. "Rifkin wants to see me."

"It's all right," she said, smiling. "You're already too attached to your red head."

"How do you know about her?"

"I told you this place was like a sorority," she said, smiling self assuredly.

"Lacey," I said.

"Yes."

"Doesn't it get to you sometimes?" I asked.

"It's not all business," she replied. "It's fun. Like Russian roulette."

When I got to Rifkin's office, I stood just inside the doorway for a moment. He was scribbling a memo with gusto, terminating each sentence with a stab of his Mont Blanc pen. He wrote like Bernstein conducted the New York Philharmonic, and no doubt thought himself the maestro of the inter-office memo. He even looked like a caricature of a conductor with the deeply etched wrinkles,

his tanned face and his silver mane. I could imagine him at the podium, his hair tousled, conducting an orchestra barely within the bounds of control.

"That'll show the bastards," he mumbled.

I cleared my throat.

"Hello, Jacob," he said, scanning his handiwork and waving me in without taking his eyes from his memo. "There are two stacks of files on the chair by the window. The set on top is your copy. Make sure you keep them in a secure place. No one is to know you have them. The set on the bottom is the original which you are to give to Edward Blanton. He knows they're coming and is expecting you. Examine your copies at your leisure, but for now understand that they constitute Blanton's deal with the devil, his severance agreement. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I muttered.

"And by the way," Rifkin added, still staring at his memo. "You had a call from Daniel Harrington. I'm told he said you had called him. He wants to meet you for lunch. Are you going to meet with him?"

"Sure," I answered. My reply must have struck him as too casual because he stopped admiring his memo and looked up at me coldly. "Look," I said, "Goldfarb suggested I talk to him..."

"Goldfarb?" he roared, his eyes daring me to meet his glare. "Goldfarb!" he repeated furiously, pointing toward the door. "Shut it and sit down!"

He glared hard at me, then looked down at his pen.

"You work for me, not that jack-ass Goldfarb. You are being paid to keep me informed of what you're doing around here."

"I've learned so little, I've had nothing to report."

He forced his upper lip over his teeth in the most artificial smile I've ever seen. "I want you to give Blanton his papers and then stick close to him," he said. "Meet Harrington for lunch on Thursday, and when you return from your lunch, you and I will sit down and discuss your situation. I've arranged your lunch, by the way. You'll meet Harrington at noon at the Rivers Club."

Interesting, I thought, considering how upset he was at my call to Harrington.

"Now listen closely," he went on, glaring at me now. "I did not hire you to be a free agent. I pay you to do my bidding. There was no reason to call goddamn Harrington or have a lunch meeting with him. You are here to serve my needs, not Goldfarb's or anyone else's. Do you understand?"

"Clearly."

"Good. Now I need one more thing from you." He was perusing the memo again. "Tomorrow the University of Pittsburgh will be naming their law library in my honor, and I would like the Mayor to be present at the ceremony. When I called his office, one of his flunkies insisted his schedule is too full to attend." He paused, glancing up at me. "I know the Mayor is fond of you. Give him a call, see what you can do."

I stared back.

"The ceremony will commence at three p.m. He won't have to do anything more than stand there and pose for a photograph or two. God knows I don't want him making any speeches. You'll take care of that, won't you?"

"Sir, you're...putting me in a awkward position," I replied, trying to wiggle out of it.

"My god, man! You're close to the Mayor, aren't you?"

"I was hardly..."

"You worked closely with his office didn't you?"

"With his office, yes..."

"Then make a call or two. That's how things get done. You worked on his campaign. Right?"

I nodded.

"He owes you one. Call in a favor. Use your chit."

"Yes sir," I replied unhappily.

"Call me Theodore," he said unconvincingly.

"Theodore," I repeated.

"And Jacob, don't forget Blanton's files."

I left his office with the files, remembering what Lacey had said about Rifkin and Goldfarb and wishing I'd never gotten involved in the whole mess. Kilmer appeared out of nowhere. "Did Rifkin just tear you a new asshole?" he asked, patting me on the shoulder.

"Did you have your ear to the door?" I asked.

"No," he said, smiling. "I just heard him yelling. What you got there?"

"Nothing. Just files."

"Bullshit," he said. "They're Blanton's severance."

"Ever think of a career in crime?" I asked.

"Crime? What do you think this is?"

Lacey Jordan walked past us and Kilmer shook his head. "Love the leather," he said under his breath.

I sat in my office most of the day, going over Blanton's "resignation agreement." The terms verged on the apologetic considering the circumstances. They were paying him off to get the hell out of dodge. I began to wonder whether Blanton really did have something on Rifkin.

I locked the files away and made a long list of all the players in the firm and charted where I thought they fell in the scheme of things. About halfway through my list I began wondering if I'd been led down the garden path.

I found myself wishing I'd never listened when Phil Hendricks told me to call Rifkin. Somewhere along the line I could have just said no, but I hadn't. I dreaded getting up in the morning, hated waiting in the lobby for the inevitable elevator ride with unfriendly partners and associates staring at me with fear and loathing in their eyes. I wanted to get out. Instead I sat in my dumb little office trying to figure out who was an enemy and who was friend. The problem was that those who looked like friends could just as well have been enemies.

I called Jenna. She told me to take a walk to clear my head, then rethink the whole situation. She also told me she was leaving work to pick up something for dinner on The Strip. "Maybe, I'll let you sleep over," she teased.

"Now I definitely won't be able to get any work done," I complained.

She laughed. It was reassuring, but I still shivered in my cold office.

I had been seeing her since the day we watched the falcons in the Gulf building. She was the type of girl I normally wouldn't have dated. She was well

read and knowledgeable about art and science, but she wasn't affected like other girls I knew – the ones from “good families,” with degrees from ‘good schools’ and attitudes to match. She'd grown up in a blue collar mill town along the river. I didn't introduce her to my friends, or even my parents. Not because I was embarrassed, but because I didn't want to share her with anyone. I liked talking about my job with her because she could see through all the crap. Maybe Lacey was right. She thought I was becoming too attached to her. Sand more than once it crossed my mind that she might even have been a plant. But that was just my paranoia talking.

Instead of going outside, I took a walk around the office and ended up face to face with Edward Blanton. I must have been smiling, thinking of Jenna because he sneered and asked what the hell I was grinning about. He probably thought I was smirking at him. He looked me up and down with disdain before storming down the corridor.

It happened so fast, I had to ask myself if it happened at all. I couldn't wait for the day to end. I couldn't wait to see Jenna.

Pittsburgh is full of hidden streets and neighborhoods tucked away in hollows and clinging impossibly to steep hillsides. Jenna's house was on Prescott Street, one of those little streets you would never have known existed unless someone pointed it out to you.

Sixty yards long, Prescott Street hugs a hillside above a ravine through which railroad tracks run. On the opposite hillside is the spur of the busway our bus travels every morning.

At the uphill terminus of the little valley, railroad tracks disappear into a tunnel that leads to Panther Hollow on the other side. There is a painting by John Kane entitled *Panther Hollow, Pittsburgh* depicting a train running on those very tracks, a steam locomotive billowing through an improbably green hollow in which cows graze.

The hollow that Prescott Street overlooks empties into Skunk Hollow just above the point where it is spanned by the Bloomfield Bridge. There is a Kane painting of this scene too, depicting the old Bloomfield Bridge and the valleys below. Two trains steam through Skunk Hollow, one in each direction, and a third train billows its way up the tracks that run up the little hollow that Prescott Street overlooks. Kane took fewer liberties in this painting, and in it you can see the mean row houses and small factories that once crowded the hills and valley of Skunk Hollow. Kane titled the painting *Bloomfield Bridge*, but he does not give the name of the run that Prescott Street overlooks.

Prescott Street itself is paved with cobblestones and consists of a dozen or so identical houses built of yellow brick with matching porches in front and small yards in back. The residents of the street are a strange mix of retirees, artists and students.

From the outside, Jenna's house looked like the others – clean, well cared for. But the inside looked like a spread out of Architectural Digest. The wood floors were stained a warm cherry and the walls were shockingly white. The furniture was spare, an eclectic mix ranging from minimalist modern to fifties blonde wood and Queen Anne reproductions. Generally there was only one piece of art per wall, and the art was also eclectic. On one wall hung a darkly lush

woodland scene in oil, in an ornate gilt frame. On the opposite wall hung a high quality reproduction of one of the Matisse cut-outs under glass with no frame, held to the wall by tenterhooks. Each piece was lit by studio lamps, as though the place was a gallery instead of the home of a girl who had grown up in the shadows of a steel mill.

Two pieces in particular caught my eye. One was a reproduction Audubon print of peregrine falcons, and the other was a strange painting of a lizard devouring a nude woman, who, though she is being eaten, seems quite nonchalant, as though it was a common occurrence, a nuisance. She seemed bored, distracted. She also looked a lot like Jenna.

She handed me a glass of wine and we kissed.

"Is that you in the painting," I asked, holding her.

"I was fourteen when I posed for it," she said. "The artist was this crazy Frenchman," she added, blushing. "It was stupid."

"It's a strange painting," I said.

She kissed me again.

"I'm a strange girl."

"Why?"

"Cause I'm involved with you."

"Am I that bad?" I asked.

"No. It's just that I usually date artsy guys." She laughed. "My mom calls them deadbeats."

"And I'm not a deadbeat."

She shook her head soberly.



"Nope. You're known all around town."

"Am I?"

"Of course. You work for Theodore Rifkin," she said in a low, mocking voice.

"And you're dating me just to make your mother happy," I suggested.

"Maybe." She smiled sweetly. "I picked flowers for the table," she said, changing the subject. "Columbine. They grow on the hill, but they're not native to this area. I don't know where they came from."

"They're nice," I said.

"I'd like to plant wild flowers all the way down the hill to the tracks, but the deer would probably eat them all."

"Deer?"

"We think they come through the railroad tunnel from Schenley Park. Last spring they ate the rhododendron my neighbor planted. He was so pissed he wanted to shoot them, but we talked him out of it."

"That's amazing," I said. "We're no more than three miles from downtown and you have deer grazing in your neighbor's garden."

"That's the problem with the people you've been running around with lately," she said, shaking her head. "They're so wrapped up in their power plays and their lawyering they forget they're just a collection of noisy molecules. They think their work is so important they forget everything else. Nature is something they can't understand."

"What brought that on?" I asked. "You're not one of those people who think we should all drop our jobs and go out and hug trees?"

"I'm trying to be serious. I'm talking about mortality here. Your lawyers live in the suburbs with their big manicured lawns and they think they can have the gardener cut the hedges back and edge the grass and pull the weeds, and deep inside, they think they can control nature. It's like they think if they can master nature out there on their lawns, they can cheat death."

"You're being very, very heavy," I said.

"Well" she said, turning toward the kitchen, "don't you ever think about death?"

"Sometimes," I replied, following her. "But I don't dwell on it."

"I don't obsess over it, but I worry about you, Jake. It's like they're paying you all this money to do their dirty work and I sometimes wonder..." She stopped.

"You wonder what?"

"I get scared that you actually enjoy it."

"Well, yeah, I do enjoy it...It's kinda cool in a sick way."

She looked at me with real concern.

"You're not becoming one of them, are you?"

"Nooo," I replied. "I don't think I'd be up to all that lawn care."

"I'm serious. I worry."

"I'll be okay," I said, taking her into my arms.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Okay," she said, unconvinced. "Let's go refresh our drinks."

The kitchen was dark, and the light from the refrigerator bathed her in yellow light. She reached in and pulled out the wine. There was something provocative about talking about death with a beautiful woman in a dark kitchen.

"The thing is," she said as I refilled our glasses. "When those people die, the dandelions will still push their way up onto those pampered suburban lawns. They just don't see it."

"I've always loved the word dandelion," I said.

She smiled and touched my face.

"You're a sweet boy. You shouldn't be mixed up with those people." She turned to check the oven.

"What's for dinner?"

"Salmon." She put on an oven mitt and pulled the fish from the oven.

"Do you always cook in the dark?" I asked.

"Only for people I like," she said, taking my hand in hers. We kissed.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Starved," I replied. She picked a piece of fish with her fingers and fed it to me. It was good, fresh fish. She pulled another piece and ate it.

"Ummm," she murmured. A dark gray cat sauntered into the room and jumped onto the counter. "That's Desdemona. She's a Russian blue." The cat sniffed at the air, then sat down looking as regal as an Egyptian cat fashioned from ebony.

"Does she have an Othello?" I asked.

"She's spayed, but one of her brothers is named Othello. He lives up the street."

We stood in the dark, picking at the fish with our fingers as Desdemona watched dispassionately. Watching Jenna, I tried to reconcile the images of the fourteen-year-old girl who had posed for the strange painting in the living room, and the Jenna who watched peregrine falcons and talked about planting the hillside in wild flowers. I couldn't figure her out, and once that would have bothered me greatly. But I didn't want to figure anything out that night.

Desdemona watched as we undressed each other in the kitchen. We never did get around to dinner.

## CH 4

Hanging at the end of a dark, dead-end corridor on the forty-sixth floor was a framed poster of a Matisse painting, the title of which I do not know. It depicts a pair of enormous French windows flung open to a Mediterranean beach on which sail boats are grounded, their masts tilted at wild angles. The windows are as large as doors, and are opened in a manner that suggests the presence of someone just outside the frame who has thrown them open passionately, and may be lying on a bed, or slumped in a chair, gazing at the beach and the sea, wishing for wings to carry them through the windows into the bright morning.

It was the implied hope of flight in the painting that always made me stop for a moment when I passed it in the dim corridor relegated to what was left of the tax group – mole-ish tax and estate lawyers confined to their offices like prisoners condemned. The Matisse seemed so out of place among those men (there were no women in tax), but at the same time I found it ironic that it hung there, as though they secretly longed for something more than the weekly tax reporter updates that crossed their desks.

I found it all the more strange to find Lacey Jordan staring at the poster late one afternoon with a sadness that implied some faint longing beyond her appetite for upward mobility.

From where I'd stopped in the corridor I couldn't see her face. Her posture was submissive, as though her knees might buckle from the pull of gravity.

Also, from where I stood, I could see Stuart Goldfarb standing just inside the door of his office, pretending to examine the contents of a manila folder.

Lacey was wearing her famous leather skirt and a sheer white silk blouse. Goldfarb was staring so unabashedly at her ass, that when she turned, he dropped his folder. I expected her to laugh right in his face. Instead, she turned and escaped down the corridor holding several folders against her chest like a school girl. She stopped when she reached me.

"That picture always stops me dead," she said. "There's just something about it."

"I know," I replied. "My mother had the same print hanging in her bedroom for years. I've looked out of those windows since I was a kid."

"It's the only window in this place I can look out of that doesn't make me sad," she said. "I don't know." She shook her head then brushed past me. Goldfarb stepped out of his office to watch her depart. He raised his bushy eyebrows and shrugged.

"That one I don't know about," he said.

I shrugged.

"It takes all sorts," I said, after an uncomfortable pause.

"She's scared for her job..."

"I suppose so," I replied. Again there was a long silence, as though he was hoping I'd leave.

"Can we talk?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, staring at the spot where Lacy had been standing.

We retired to his office and shut the door. His bookshelves and the top of his credenza were packed with the acrylic "tombstones" handed out at the closing of a deal.

"What's up, Jake?" he asked.

"I still don't understand the real estate scheme that Blanton and his New York friends dreamed up."

He sat heavily, sighed and took his glasses off to rub his eyes.

"The whole thing was set up through a bogus bank holding company. PanBank, a series of banks really. The holding company was based in New York and chartered in the Bahamas. Set up by our friends at McQuoid & Reed with Blanton's help. The company consisted of two subsidiary banks and a toy manufacturer, which is the one thing I could never figure out – why a toy company? Anyway, one subsidiary bank was chartered in Hawaii, the other in Taiwan. The Hawaiian bank was chartered for two reasons – one, so they could do business in the U.S., and two..."

"To make the Hawaiian housing project deal look legit," I finished for him. "What better way to draw American and Japanese investors than a public housing project in Hawaii."

"Exactly. It's a tax shelter that soothes rich investors' guilty consciences. And remember, all of this was going on back when the Japanese looked like they were going to buy the islands wholesale. By investing, they could point to it as a grand gesture for the islanders, while the American investors could wave the flag and say they were doing something for the Hawaiian underclass. You wouldn't believe how many old limousine liberals got suckered into the scheme," he said, shaking his head. By this time Goldfarb was absorbed in the telling of the story and showing-off how much he knew, shaking his head like a little boy telling an incredible story.

"Now," he said, leaning forward in his chair, as though he was getting to the sexy part of the story.

"The bank in Taiwan was their entry into the Pacific rim's league of shady banks. It was associated with banks in Hong Kong, Thailand and Pakistan. Blanton and his pals figured it would be so hard for investigators to untangle the web of who owned what that they'd be out of the game long before the authorities caught on."

"Unless someone opened their mouth," I offered.

He looked at me and pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

"Jake, the Feds already know all this. The con was on. Blanton and his pals knew someone would sniff it out eventually. Like I said, by then they figured they'd be long gone. The whole thing is outlined in the indictment."

"But something went wrong," I said.

"A fly in the ointment," Goldfarb nodded.

"Who?"

"Who knows?"

"Why do you think Blanton did it?" I asked.

"Money."

"Greed?"

"Sure, and ego."

"Do you think anyone here had motive to bring him down?"

"Sure, lots of people," he replied.

"But who knew about the details of the scam?"



He shrugged his shoulders and gave me one of those “What, should I know?” looks old Jewish men give you when even if they know the answer, they sure as hell aren't going to tell you.

I laughed. I had to. I wasn't going to find out anything unless I went directly to the man. And I'd put off delivering Blanton's walking papers long enough.

I left Goldfarb's office and passed the lonely and beckoning Matisse. Like Lacey, I longed to jump out one of those windows and into the warm Riviera morning.

When I arrived at Blanton's office he was looking out the window, his back to the door. I hesitated for a moment. He was in his mid forties and mostly bald. The curly hair that remained, tumbled down almost to his shoulders. His hands were clasped behind his back just above the single vent of his impeccably tailored suit jacket. He was probably twenty pounds overweight, but he was smaller than I'd expected.

"Niggers," he muttered. It was barely audible. "Niggers," he repeated. I remained in the doorway with the file in my hands. He knew I was there but he continued to stare out the window. I walked over to where he stood. Below us was the Hill District, once a thriving ghetto, first of Jews, then of blacks. It had once been a vibrant neighborhood, home to the Negro league baseball team the champion Crawfords with the likes of Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson and Cool Papa Bell on the roster. Jazz greats Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker had played the Garden Theater and the Crawford Grill, but urban redevelopment in the 1960s

reduced the neighborhood to housing projects, vacant lots and condemned buildings.

"After Martin Luther King was shot they rioted," Blanton said. "It was Palm Sunday. They were so angry. They had mob power and what did they do? They burned down their own neighborhood – gutted the `hood. The Micks at the police station must've been laughing their asses off that night. They didn't do anything, just waited until the National Guard was called in. That's the way the system works – it looks out for itself. The system screwed them you know," he said, pointing at the streets below. "It screwed me and it will screw you, too."

He rocked back and forth on his heels. "You know," he said, sighing bitterly, "once upon a time I thought I could make a difference in this town. I actually thought money and power could be used to do good. Mellon and Davey Lawrence did it. They changed downtown, tore down slums, called it the `Renaissance.' But beneath the mask of good intentions was one simple truth – they only did it to further their interests. I used to think it was great. Civic improvement. I was dumb, I didn't see it. I sided with the blacks, the poor guys, because that's how I saw myself, you know, as an underdog. I've done everything I could have done in this fucking town, but I never really changed anything, because the system doesn't do what's right. It does what's right for the system."

He turned and half-smiled at me. There was something of an elfin charm about him. He was a portly long-haired devil with a charming demeanor.

"I was a goddamn poster boy for a while. I sat on boards of social organizations. Corporations came to me to mount takeovers. Now I'm a Jonah. No one'll touch me, and I feel guilty. Ashamed. Shit, I did exactly what they did,

but I did it better. And they made me pay." He sighed and looked at his hands. He looked at me for the first time, really looked me over.

"Have you ever stopped in the middle of doing something you're really into and wonder how you got there? Do you play sports?"

"Lacrosse. In high school."

"Violent game," he said. "My kid wants to play it. Anyway, did you ever really get into hitting guys, looking around for who to hit next?"

"Yeah, sometimes."

"That's what it's like when you're in the middle of a battle for a company. High minded ideals go right out the window. You're surrounded by sons-of-bitches who are just as mean as you, and the only thing in the world that matters is the fight. There were times when I stood in hand-to-hand-combat, during negotiations and in the back of my mind I was trying to remember my kids' names. But, nothing else mattered. To be in that zone is the most euphoric feeling in the world. It's like a drug and you want more and you don't give a shit about the poor sons of bitches who might lose their jobs or the kids who'll go hungry, you just want more." He shook his head and sighed.

"It's sick. And when it's over you literally feel like a part of you is missing. All you want is to do another deal, kick some more ass. If you don't have a deal going you feel empty, dried out. You think people are staring at you like you have some physical deformity. You start getting paranoid and think they're talking behind your back, and they're really just reacting to your paranoia.

"They pulled the plug on me," he said, pointing toward the hallway. "I'm enemy number one all of a sudden and it's as if I don't exist. People don't return

my calls. They don't invite my wife to luncheons. On the street they pass me by as if I'm not even there, like I'm dead.

"And what's eating away at me, for Christ's sake? That I didn't do any good. Why the fuck should I even care about...them," he said, pointing at the neighborhood sprawled at our feet. "Why should I let it even get me down? Shit..." He stopped and stared out the window again, then turned to face me. He looked tired, worn out.

"Let's see what you've got," he said, pointing to the folder I held in my hand.

He leafed through the documents without reading them, then closed the folder and held it in his hands as though he was guessing its weight. He read the last page in its entirety and let out a little grunt. These were the papers that would effectively ruin him, and he treated them like they were junk mail. He threw the folder on top of his empty desk.

"Let's get a drink," he said.

"Don't you want to take a closer look at the papers?" I asked.

"Later Iago," he said, straightening his tie. He looked down at the folder, shook his head and loosened his tie again. He looked like hell. "Later," he repeated. "Let's go have a few."

I hesitated. "I've got other work..."

"Fuck it," he said. He looked at me as if he knew there were things I wanted to know. "Come on."

"Okay," I said. I was curious to see him in action.

Harper's was cool and blue and empty. The hostess approached and said they wouldn't be open for another half-hour. Blanton whispered something in her ear and slipped her a fifty. We headed to a table while she went behind the bar and mixed two Tanqueray and tonics.

"I have the touch," he said, cheered by the prospect of drinks. "I'm evil. Did Rifkin told you that during your talk the other day?"

"How do you know about that?"

"I know all," he replied, pleased with himself, standing, his fists pressed to the table. "I am the vilest of the vile. Mephistopheles personified. That's what Rifkin told you, isn't it?"

"Virtually," I said.

Blanton laughed and took his seat. He was the sort of man I wouldn't have liked. And when it was all said and done, I'm not sure I ever really did like him. Take away the fine tailoring of his suits and he was just another mean little man trying to prove he was more than a pit bull hired to fight battles for others who didn't want to get their hands dirty. He was unpolished, but he had a certain charm. You could tell by the way the hostess greeted him and how easily he was able to get her to open the bar for us. He wasn't terribly good looking. He could have been one of those dirty little pot-bellied men you see shuffling in and out of the peep shows on Liberty Avenue. At some point along his ascendance someone must have coached him, but no matter how expensive his suits or his haircut, he could never hide his baseness, and you got the feeling he didn't want to. It was part of the whole package.

His eyes were extremely blue and round like his face. His nose was small and straight and I had an inkling it had been fixed. His skin was surprisingly clear and tanned, smooth.

The hostess was obviously interested in him. She talked with the big-haired waitress who'd come on duty, looking over at our table periodically.

"She's putty in my hands," he said.

"Seems so," I said.

"She's a dog. I like women who are dogs. Not dog ugly, but dog personality, you know? I like dog people in general. You aren't a dog. You're more of a wolf. Wolves are different than dogs, they can rip you to shreds. That's what makes them dangerous, that and their aloofness." He shook his head. "I could tell you were a wolf the minute I saw you. Give me a dog any day."

"Dogs," I said.

"Yeah," he replied as the hostess appeared with our drinks. "Dogs are happy, eager to please. They're lovable, they sniff each other's asses and say 'hey let's party,' or 'let's fight,' or 'let's fuck.' Dogs love to party." He looked up as she placed our drinks in front of us. "Thanks sweetheart," he said.

"And wolves?" I asked.

"Wolves," Blanton said, shaking his head and sipping his drink. "Wolves hunt in packs and howl at the moon. Wolves scare the shit out of me."

"Feeling hunted?" I asked.

"I feel like the fox in the hunt, like they're gonna have me for lunch."

"But they don't eat the fox," I said.

"Well, sure, they just throw them..."

"To the dogs," I said.

"Touché," he retorted, smiling.

I laughed and took a pull on my drink.

"Now my wife," Blanton said, pausing to empty his glass, "my wife's a cat. I can't stand cats. They do their own thing. They're aloof as hell. You try to love `em but they only return the affection when they feel like it. My wife is a beautiful woman, don't get me wrong. She's popped out three little ones and she's still a knockout, but if she were a dog and never bore me one kid, I'd never look at another woman."

"Never?"

He nodded.

"Never. Dogs just want to be chased around the house butt-naked." He motioned to the waitress to bring more drinks. I was only half way through mine. "Two more," he said. She smiled broadly, glancing over at the hostess. I tried to object, but Blanton waved me off, turning in his chair to check out the hostess and the waitress. "They like you," he said. He watched the waitress shake her ass as she made her way to the bar and shrugged. "I'd fuck her."

"You're a dog," I said.

"And?" he asked.

"And..."

"I'd fuck anything?" he asked brusquely.

I didn't say anything.

"That's what you were thinking, wasn't it," he said, unsmiling. He leaned across the little table and stared me down.

"Well..." I said.

A grin crossed his face.

"Give me enough liquor and I probably would!" he declared, smiling again, proud of himself. He took the fresh drink from the waitress's tray and threw most of it back in one gulp.

"Another!" he roared, pleased with himself.

The waitress returned with two more drinks.

"Thank you dear," Blanton said. She smiled a toothy lipstick-smearing smile and leaned over the table to pick up the empty glasses. Blanton stared down the front of her blouse. "I hope you know you just made my day," he told her.

"I know," she said, walking away, stopping once to turn and smile at us.

"God, I love women," Blanton said. "I love `em." He paused and gazed at his glass for a moment like an ape in the zoo contemplating a banana. "I think I love the thought of women more than I love women themselves," he continued. "I mean the thought of peeling the clothes off a woman, touching her, feeling her skin. If I could bottle that feeling, I'd never have to touch another woman and would be happy until the day I died."

"If you could bottle that feeling, it would probably mean the end of mankind," I said.

He paused for a moment, thinking it over.

"Yeah, I suppose it would. Guys would sit in dark rooms swilling my potion like Chinamen in opium dens. No," he said, seriously considering the ill effects of his magic elixir. "No, that wouldn't be good. You'd have to wave



good-bye to fucking and that would eliminate man's thirst for mayhem – raping, pillaging – that kind of shit. That's what distinguishes men from women – the thirst for battle. Without it we'd all be going around asking each other if our shoes matched our purses. No, that would definitely be bad," he concluded, his face contorted in a mask of concern.

"Let me get this straight," I said, light-headed from the gin. "Doing battle is a substitute for sex, which if I understand you, is the underlying motive of all men."

"Absolutely," he replied. "Tell me, what is the only thing more exhilarating than being in the middle of a good fight?"

"Sex?" I offered.

"Yes," he replied, exasperated. "Christ, sex and war are the only things that keep men from blowing their heads off. As long as you're doing at least one of them you're still alive. Look at how Rifkin's fucking me, how I'm screwing...well..."

"How you're screwing who?" I asked. "Come on Blanton, throw me a bone."

"You'd love that, wouldn't you?" he replied, the suspicion rising in his shiny, round face.

"Not for Rifkin," I said, pointing to the door and the world of attorneys perched in the buildings towering above our heads. "To hell with Rifkin. I want to know for me. I still don't know what's going on."

He eyed me suspiciously.

"From what I've heard, you've pushed all the right buttons," he said.

"The right buttons?"

"Asked the right questions of the right people," he replied, swirling the ice around in his glass.

"I may have asked the right people," I said. "But I'm not sure I've asked the right questions. And I know the answers I've been given aren't the right ones."

"The right answers for who?" he asked. "You or them?"

"Me," I said, smiling at the distinction. "I feel like a cop questioning eyewitnesses at the scene of a crime. Everyone claims they didn't see a thing, but you know damn well someone had to have seen something."

Blanton laughed, then pointed to a group of young ladies who'd entered the bar.

"Don't take yourself too seriously," he said, staring unabashedly as they sat at a table across the room. "You'll do all right."

"Don't get my hopes up," I said.

"I'm serious," he said, still staring at the women.

Walt Harper emerged from the kitchen and spotted Blanton. He excused himself and sauntered over to the small stage where Harper had taken a seat at the piano and began playing "Isn't it Romantic." Blanton said something to him and he threw his head back and laughed. I wondered what Blanton meant when he said he was "serious" about me doing all right.

It was amazing how a few drinks could perk him up. As he talked with Harper, nothing about his demeanor suggested the desperation he'd expressed a half hour earlier. There was something of the swashbuckler about him. It was

easy to see what women saw in him, at least what some women saw in him. I knew Jenna would have hated him and that thought made me feel better.

He detoured over to the table where the women sat. Except for me, Blanton and their little party, the place was still empty. He was talking with the ringleader of the group, a brassy blonde who wore a black leotard top that displayed her breasts like trophies. As she flirted with Blanton, the shrinking violet of the group surveyed the room looking for someone to save her and her friends from the wolf who'd just huffed and puffed at their door. She was about my age, and had a long elegant neck and large blue eyes, short blonde hair and wore diamond stud earrings her daddy must have given her.

Her eyes met mine and I tried as hard as I could to meet her gaze with the kind of hungry look Blanton would have used. She glanced at Blanton who still hovered over the ringleader, then back at me. I am not the aggressive type, and I had no interest in her whatsoever, but at that moment I liked the fact she was scared, yet interested in me at the same time. I tried with all my might to stare at her with that “I know what I want and what I want is you” look, but I couldn't sustain it. Instead, I let out a little laugh and rolled my eyes skyward. She smiled back with an expression of both relief and something of a letdown.

Sometime during the course of playing games with the shrinking violet across the bar, Goldfarb and a few other Rifkin, Sampson attorneys had come in and taken a table close to the door. I must have noticed them at about the same time as Blanton, because he made his way back to our table, glancing over at them once or twice. Goldfarb waved. I knew Blanton had something important to say to me to have pulled himself away from the women, who by that time

seemed to have taken a liking to him, if for no other reason than for the bottle of Dom Perignon he'd bought them.

"I see the trolls have shown up," he said as he took his seat, motioning for the waitress. He ordered another round for us, and a second bottle of champagne for the ladies. He also slipped her two crisp hundred dollar bills to cover the tab, telling her to keep what was left for herself.

"Listen to me," he said, glancing over at Goldfarb and the others. "Those guys and some of their buddies are looking out for their own asses. They're dangerous, so take everything they say with a grain of salt. I know you've already talked with Goldfarb..."

"Who's filling you in?" I asked. "Kilmer?"

He shrugged.

"That little fuck," I hissed.

Blanton smiled.

"Anyway..." I insisted.

"Anyway," he smiled again, "everybody's looking out for their own interests. Just remember that."

"You're stating the obvious," I said, still angered.

"Well," he said, pausing to thank the waitress for the drinks, "those pussies are running scared because their share of the kitty could decrease significantly if something goes shit-hits-the-fan wrong. They'll side with whoever will keep their little Ivy League pencil necks from the chopping block. Get my drift?"

"How couldn't I?" I asked.

"Funny a couple of hyenas can ruin a perfectly good evening," he said. "This used to be a great bar, you know," he said. "Back in the eighties you'd blow out of work at six and come here, battle for a seat, grab a couple drinks, then go back to the office with a buzz and work all night on whatever deal you were doing at the time. Or if you were between deals, you could pick up some ditzy secretary, take her back to the office and plow the shit out of her.

"Those days are over, boy," he continued, mourning the loss. "What little night life there was in town has given way to the fags and their clubs, and the gray-hairs getting the early bird special before falling asleep at the symphony. Walt's closing the club at the end of the month. He just told me. It's a damn shame." He glanced over at Goldfarb and company, then threw back his drink and motioned for me to do the same. "Let's blow this dump," he said.

I let the gin and tonic roll down my throat. My stomach tightened, and I realized I hadn't eaten since lunch. Blanton stepped over to the piano to say good night to Walt, then offered his farewells to the ladies at their table. Blanton whispered something in the hostess' ear and patted her ass. Goldfarb nodded as we passed and Blanton said "fuck you" under his breath. I left in his tow, glancing over my shoulder at Goldfarb and the others.

"Did he tell me to fuck off?" Goldfarb asked one of them.

Blanton stopped for a moment, his hands on his hips, contemplating the darkened lobby of the building which was quiet but for the sound of the patrons at Harper's and the tinkle of Walt Harper's piano. Early evening moonlight filtered over the atrium. "Whadda you say we get some grub?" Blanton asked.

"Sure," I replied. "I'm starved."

"Me too," he said, his spirits momentarily lifted by the prospect of eating. "I'm fucking starved. How's surf and turf sound?"

"Sounds good. I have to make a call," I said.

"You're too young to have a ball and chain," he sneered. "You can call your little lady from the restaurant."

"She's not my little lady," I replied defensively.

He snickered as we exited the building, and headed down Fourth Avenue, a narrow street of old buildings with ornate facades that used to be called skyscrapers when ten stories seemed to scrape the sky.

"What I love about this place," Blanton said, holding the door to Klein's open for me, "the waitresses here are even meaner than me."

The hostess showed Blanton to the table and pointed me in the direction of the pay phone. I got Jenna's answering machine and left a message that I was drinking with Blanton and I couldn't get out of it because it was business, which wasn't a total lie. I also said I didn't know when I'd make it to her place.

Blanton had already ordered a round of drinks by the time I got to the table.

"So tell me about your little lady," he said with only passing interest. "What makes an otherwise level-headed character like yourself lose your head like that?"

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like your ass was going to be grass if you didn't call and tell her what you were up to."

"It's only polite."

"You're whipped," he grunted.

"Does it look that way?"

He nodded.

"I've only known her for a few weeks, and last night was the first time we slept together," I said as the waitress approached to take our orders. The waitresses at Klein's have worn the same outfit since the beginning of time—white blouse, black skirt with a white apron, and black comfortable shoes. They all seem to have been working there since shortly after the Civil War.

Blanton ordered a dozen oysters on the half shell, surf and turf with sides of linguine and green beans, and a tossed salad thrown in for good measure. I ordered tortellini, but he insisted I have the surf and turf. When I passed on the vegetable and the salad, he scolded me for not getting enough vitamins.

"You've got to eat balanced meals if you plan to do all that screwing with that girl of yours," he said winking at the ancient waitress. She shook her head, glaring at him. Blanton laughed.

"So tell me about your girl," he said, finishing his drink.

"She's all right. She works in an art gallery in town..."

"Name?" he insisted. The waitress brought the oysters. He ordered another round of drinks.

"Jenna," I replied.

"Sounds kinky," he said, the oysters and Jenna's name piquing his interest.

"Hair?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Smart ass." He smiled. "Color."

"Red, auburn really."

"I love redheads, had a string of them back in the late seventies. They all fucked liked banshees," he said, slurping an oyster. "Is this Jenna good in the sack?"

"She's...good."

"Like what? How good. Details, my boy, I want details."

"She's good in bed. Period," I replied. "I don't like talking about my sex life."

"Ahh. A discreet man, a man of honor. I can respect that, I suppose. But I'm sitting here making my way through a dozen oysters, and pretty soon our little old waitress is going to start looking like a Playboy pin-up."

Having caught the latter part of Blanton's discourse, the waitress cleared the empty oyster shells from the table, and threw Blanton's salad in front of him.

"Ever think of trying out for the Pirates, hon?" he asked. "They could use a couple good hurlers," he said, winking at me. The waitress ignored him.

"Y'ins need more bread?" she asked, disgusted.

Blanton waived her off with a flourish while shoveling salad into his mouth.

"Tell me" he continued, his mouth full, "does this Jenny have nice tits?"

"Jenna" I said.

"What?"

"Her name is Jenna and her chest is nice enough," I replied, growing angrier.



"Hey buddy, no need to get mad, I'm just asking," he said. "No offense?"

"No offense," I replied sourly.

"So her tits aren't too big."

"No."

"Some guys think there's no such thing as too big. I'm of the opinion a woman can be too busty. Anything more than a nice handful is vulgar, greedy, you know, a waste. How `bout her ass?"

"It's nice," I replied.

"Nice? What? Is it round, pear shaped, heart shaped, what?"

"It's...nice. I haven't made an effort to categorize it."

He shook his head and wiped his mouth with his napkin which had already suffered a good deal of abuse. "Don't you think she's sat around with her friends talking about you, describing your ass. Women, and I don't care where they come from, love to talk about fucking."

"You seem convinced," I said.

Blanton finished the last of his salad and slid his empty plate aside, then leaned over the table close enough to kiss me...or brain me. "I've noticed this about you and it's the one thing I can't stand in people," he hissed. "You believe in formality, in acting correctly. You glide through life like you're lubricated with some special oil that lets you move around without making scenes. You believe so much in discretion that you move on without noticing the people you leave in your wake who have to pick up the fucking rubble you leave behind."

"I hate to break your bubble, buddy, but as much as you'd like to see everyone act like perfect little ladies and gentlemen, there is no such thing as

discretion anymore. Look around you. We have become a nation of exhibitionists. We're told to 'Just Do It,' and if you do 'do it,' you do it out in the open. When you want to destroy someone else, you make no bones about it. Hell, do it on television in front of millions of viewers. This is the nineties.

"You fight force with force – get in their face and say, 'look motherfucker, I can't fucking stand you and I'm going to level your ass. I'm letting you know now so you'll know it's coming.' That's the way I've always operated, and I fucking love it. It's the only way you get things done. Face 'em down, make them fear you.

"You, on the other hand, believe in keeping it all under wraps until you spring. You kiss your worst enemy's ass – 'hello Bob, how're the kids, the wife, oh that's wonderful, good for you' – then you turn around and hang him by the balls. That's Rifkin's way and the way of all those other old fuckers. I can't stand that shit. I can't stand people who dance around the issue. They ask 'how do you feel about that?' like life is one big therapy session instead of all-out war. It's bullshit."

The waitress brought our entrees and Blanton ordered another round of drinks. I had to down about half of mine before the waitress took my glass away.

"Today marks the beginning of your education, my boy," Blanton said, lightening up a bit. "There's nothing wrong with sticking your neck out. Make a scene if you want, throw a drink in your rival's face then kick him in the balls and send him packing." He stabbed his steak as though it were his mortal enemy then spun around, his mouth full, and shouted for steak sauce. I shook my head.

"What? No steak sauce?" he asked.

"It's a perfectly fine piece of meat and you want steak sauce?" I asked, shaking my head. "You have no fucking clue."

"Good!" he said, nodding as the busboy brought the steak sauce. He swallowed hard and pointed his knife at me. "That was good, see. Say what you feel. If I disgust you, don't roll your eyes like I'm some cretin. Tell me. Don't keep your snoot so high in the air all the time."

"I'll remember that," I replied. He ripped open his lobster tail and extracted the pale meat in one piece. Dipping one end in butter, he took an enormous bite then placed the rest back on his plate.

"There are two types of men in this world," he said, his mouth full again. "Motherfuckers and pansies. There's only one kind of pansy and that is your garden variety pussy. He's got no backbone, no balls. He's willing to be led around by the nose by women and motherfuckers. Accountants are pansies. Hell, most men are. Pansies are important because if everyone was a motherfucker, it would be total mayhem, vikings and vandals, that kind of shit. Nothing would get done. You need foot soldiers and clerks, and that's what pansies are. Men like Goldfarb, the guys in real estate, all of tax and most of corporate – they're pansies.

"Motherfuckers are exactly what the name implies. They'll fuck you given the chance. Of course, there are different degrees of motherfucker and there are only a few true motherfuckers, but lawyers, if they're worth a damn, have to be motherfuckers. In its heyday, Rifkin, Sampson had one of the most impressive stables of motherfuckers around."

"Who is the biggest motherfucker?" I asked.

"Most of the guys in litigation are some damn mean motherfuckers, same with labor and environmental. Rifkin was by far the biggest motherfucker of the old guard, and Harrington is one mean son-of-a-bitch."

"But who's the biggest?" I repeated.

Blanton looked up from his steak and smiled.

"I am," he said.

"And if I were to ask Rifkin, would he agree?"

He smiled.

"In a minute," he said, chewing with joyful abandon. He swallowed hard. "Let me tell you a story. When I first made partner, Rifkin invited my wife and me to the Concordia Club for dinner along with some of the other partners and their wives. I sat next to Rifkin's wife, have you met her?"

"No," I replied.

"Classy broad, tough, elegant. Anyway, over the course of dinner we discuss real estate, kids, schools, you know, the usual dinner party shit. And then just before dessert, she takes my hand in hers. Christ, I'll never forget this as long as I live. She takes my hand and looks me in the eye and tells me her husband holds me in high regard and that he sees great things in my future. Then she makes me promise I won't do anything to hurt him or the firm because, and I swear to god this is the truth, he told her he was afraid of me. Rifkin, afraid of me! I mean I was on cloud nine when she told me that. That's when I knew I was the biggest motherfucker of all."

"And here we are," I said.

Blanton shook his head and sipped his drink.

"Okay," go ahead and say it," he said. "You want to say it...how far the mighty fall. You know you want to say it. Say it. I would."

"I guess I'm not the sort to rub salt in wounds," I replied, not sure why I felt sorry for him.

"Don't get me wrong," he cautioned. "I'm still one of the meanest motherfuckers in town."

"Oh, I believe you," I assured him. "The funny thing is," I said, "I like you. I like hanging out with you. I wouldn't feel comfortable going out for drinks and dinner one on one with any other partner in the firm."

"That's my secret," he said as he finished his steak, swallowing hard. "Most SOBs feel they have to intimidate you, make you squirm. I try to be affable, smile, be the good sam as I crush 'you. You know, smile as you say, 'sorry buddy but you're fucked,' then shrug your shoulders, smile and move on. Just like an alligator. You know how they always seem to be smiling..."

"An alligator."

He leaned back from the table holding his hands like the open jaws of a reptile, then snapped them tight.

"Snap!"

"Snap," I repeated.

"The jaws of death," he said. He belched loudly, obviously satiated, patted his round belly then backed his chair from the table.

"I have to piss," he announced, throwing a credit card at me. "Tip the old bat well if I don't come back in time," he called from across the dining room. I wrote in a 25% tip and he returned just in time to sign the receipt.

By the time we left Klein's, he had to have had ten gin and tonics and I must have downed seven or eight myself. We poured ourselves into his Jaguar and drove to Shadyside to catch a lousy jazz band at The Balcony.

I was very drunk and it felt like we sat there for an eternity. Blanton didn't pay much attention to me and instead watched the heavy-set woman in a gold lamé blouse and tight black stretch pants singing with the band. She was trying to scat her way through a skittering, up-tempo rendition of "Isn't it Romantic," which seemed to be the theme song of the evening.

"You're looking at my past," Blanton said, staring at the singer.

"You've got an ugly fucking past," I slurred. He glanced over at me with what started as an angry glare and ended as a smile. "You're not going to get misty eyed on me are you?" I asked. "'Cause I'm gonna puke if you start getting nostalgic."

"Don't sweat it," he said. "No, it's just that all of a sudden I find myself looking over my shoulder, watching out for people like you. You don't think you mean harm. But somewhere along the line, you're going to have to decide whether or not you want to hurt me."

"Hey, I don't want to hurt anyone," I slurred, holding my hands up, palms out. Between the gin and the music, everything seemed to move in slow motion.

"Oh, you're going to brew up a royal shitstorm, there's no way you can avoid it," he said without taking his eyes from the singer. "You've already started. But I'm not going to let you ruin my...what is it they say now?" he asked, turning to me. "My twelve year old said it the other day— wreck my..."

"Wreck my buzz?"

"Yeah, that's it. Rifkin and Goldfarb and... you...no one's going to wreck my buzz. If I go down in flames, the very least I can do is put on a good show."

I raised my glass in a toast.

"To the show," I said, touching my glass to his. "So tell me about your past up there," I said, pointing at the chanteuse.

"It's like the man said, 'it's not the years, it's the miles.' Her name's Shelly Downey. She changed it from Dubinski. She used to be one of the hottest numbers in town." He shook his head. "She was long and lean and walked around in three inch heels just to clean the house." He sighed. "Damn."

The former Shelly Dubinski singing on stage was heavily made up, but it would have taken a lot more than make-up to hide the toll the years had taken on her. Her jowls jiggled when she hit low notes, and every once in a while a stage light caught a glimmer of her blue-green eye shadow, sparkling like the tail of a fading falling star. When she leaned back to hit high notes, her round belly showed through her blouse. She was wearing the three inch heels Blanton remembered most about her, but they made her look like a gilded pear balanced on a pair of black stilts.

"She was addicted to cocaine and diet pills for about twenty years," Blanton said. "But she used to be skinny and lithe and loved to fuck. God, you should have seen her back then. She was always running places. She'd jump into bed with you, then run around whatever apartment she was living in, her firm little tits bouncing about. Damn." He shook his head and sighed. "Damn."

Shelly dedicated the next song to an old friend in the audience and Blanton smiled, lost in memory.

We left before she finished the song. I was absolutely blitzed, but Blanton actually seemed less disheveled than he'd been when we'd first left the office. It had to have been around one or one thirty in the morning because Blanton rushed me to the car and we raced up Centre Avenue toward Chief's for one more drink before last call. He parked the Jag across the street from the bar on Craig.

We were about to cross when two drunks literally fell out the door of The Luna. They rolled around on the sidewalk, throwing punches here and there. A crowd spilled from the dark bar to watch, and I realized one of the combatants was a woman who seemed to land more punches than her opponent. Blanton pulled a wad of bills from his pocket and pulled the largest spectator aside.

"Here's a fifty," he said, laying a Grant in the ape's paw. "Make sure they don't get too close to the car." The guy glanced at the Jaguar and nodded. We started to cross the street, but Blanton turned and headed into the middle of the crowd assembled around the combatants. Much to their displeasure, he pulled the woman off the man.

"Let go of me!" the woman screamed. "I'll kill him!" Her opponent crawled to the curb and retched. Blanton shoved the woman into a bouncer's arms and headed across the street again. The crowd shuffled back into The Luna, glaring angrily at Blanton. The last to move was the ape he'd given the fifty to. The poor guy stood there on the sidewalk staring at the fresh bill in his hand. Blanton looked at him wearily, then told him not to spend it all in one place.

"No shit?" the guy asked.

"No shit," Blanton replied, disgusted.



I started toward Chief's, but Blanton stopped me.

"I'm gonna go home," he said quietly. The last strains of Sinatra singing "The Summer Wind," wafted on the air as two bikers exited Chief's. "Shit," Blanton said, shaking his head as he sat on the curb.

The streets were quiet for a moment. Somewhere, a cricket was chirping. The neon sign above the supermarket flickered for a moment, then went black.

"Need a ride?" Blanton asked as I offered him a hand up.

"No, Jenna lives nearby," I said, realizing I was less than two blocks from Prescott Street.

"You'll learn," he said, a tired smile crossing his face. He straightened his tie and brushed the dust from his pants before climbing into his car.

I walked down Centre to the alley that led to Prescott Street. The road fell away and suddenly I was under a canopy of trees. A light shone on Jenna's porch. I wondered how mad she'd be. Something stirred in the brush and I strained to see what it was. The moon cleared the clouds and at the end of the street three deer stood fixed-eyed, staring at me. We gazed at one another until they dropped their heads and resumed feeding on the vegetation at the end of the street.

The light on Jenna's porch went out and the deer raised their heads again. Jenna tiptoed down the porch steps wearing a pair of men's pajamas. She hugged me from behind and we watched the deer. She grasped me tightly, holding her warm body against my back and kissed my neck.

"So innocent," she said. Standing there watching the deer, I couldn't tell whether she was talking about them or me.



## CH 5

The morning after my escapades with Blanton I was hung-over and late for work. Jenna had let me sleep in. As I took the 8:15 into town, I tried to go over everything that had happened the night before, and swore at myself for trying to go drink for drink with Blanton. My head ached and the fact I had a lunch meeting with Harrington only made things worse.

Looking about the bus I noticed the squirrel man sitting across from me, alone. Without his squirrel wife he looked as bad as I felt. Had his little squirrel mate run off with one of those fancy, bushy-tailed black squirrels? He looked so pathetically lost I couldn't bear to look.

The bus began its descent down the long hill to Skunk Hollow and the busway. To avoid looking at the forlorn squirrel man, I watched the scenery roll by. Through the canopy of the trees, I noticed that the mannequin the make-up lady had mistaken for a corpse the day before had been assembled. Naked, it sat upon the refrigerator as though it were a sled. Its head was bowed, chin to chest, looking as dejected and abandoned as the squirrel man. We sped through Skunk Hollow and I watched the landscape scream by. As we rounded a corner, the morning Amtrak train rumbled past in the opposite direction. Passengers stared back at me, their faces a blur, and I turned in my seat to watch the last car roll by. A conductor standing in the open vestibule tipped back the last sip of whiskey from a pint then threw the bottle to the tracks. A thousand shards of glass glimmered momentarily in the morning sun as it shattered.

I was still feeling hung-over at noon when I met Harrington for lunch at the Rivers Club, an exclusive private health and dining club in one of those gleaming downtown office buildings. The dining room was doing brisk business, more than could be said for the health club. If there's one thing you can say about Pittsburgh it is this – you might be able to make an athletic club profitable, but it better have a dining room. Pittsburghers would rather eat than sweat.

The dining room was plush. Dark green and salmon hues dominated, as if to make absolutely clear it was not the Duquesne Club. No genteel, dimly lit rooms with walnut paneling and heavily curtained windows here. The Rivers Club was stainless steel and obtuse abstract art. Nouveau riche and darn proud of it.

Harrington didn't fit in. He was tall and thin, wiry, almost gaunt with a pale, ruddy complexion. He wasn't what I'd expected at all. I'd imagined Blanton's mentor to be a dark tough with slicked-back hair in an expensive Italian suit. Instead, he was sinewy, awkward looking, with a prominent Adam's apple, and a frowning, hard militaristic disposition, as though he was impatient for something, anything, to be done. He seemed forever at attention, taut, as though ready to leap into combat at any moment. A thick vein ran up the side of his forehead and into his closely cropped hair where his receding hairline met his part.

I've since heard he had enemies who wished him, without equivocation, six feet in the earth. Without having said one word, I wished I wasn't as hung over as I was, and I hoped I'd be able to make it through the morning without having to excuse myself to go throw-up.

"So you're the young man striking fear in the hearts of our friends at Rifkin, Sampson," he said as he stood to shake my hand. He looked me up and down before taking a seat. "Two hundred dollar shoes. A man after Edward Blanton's heart," he said.

"I just met him for the first time last night," I replied.

"Then you must be terribly hung over," he replied, a wry smile playing on his lips. "How is Edward?" he asked, not seeming to care.

The waiter approached and he ordered spinach salad, without the bacon bits and croutons, and requested a lemon to squeeze over his greens rather than dressing. He also asked for an extra glass of water along with his Chablis. I didn't want him to think me extravagant so I ordered the avocado salad and opted for the Chardonnay.

"He thinks everyone's abandoned him," I said.

"Who?" he demanded.

"Blanton," I replied. "Your old partner."

"Oh well...Yes," he said, sizing me up and down again.

"Speaking of Edward, tell me," he said, sipping his wine, "where do you stand in relation to him?"

"Out of the way, I hope."

"Hopeful, but unlikely," he said. He took another tiny sip of his wine and pursed his lips. "In any matter...I asked you here because I was curious to meet the latest Gold to start tongues wagging around town."

He touched his napkin to his lips and glowered at me with a hard smile that absolutely lacked humor. We stared at each other awkwardly for another moment.

"I knew your father," he said. "He was a capable lawyer."

"He's still quite alive," I said.

"Oh...yes. Yes," he replied. "He no longer practices does he?" he asked though he knew the answer.

"No, he does not," I said.

"No," he replied. "I first started at your grandfather's firm," he continued. "I was only a year there. Your father was in the Washington office at the time." He didn't look to gauge my response. He could have brought up the Washington situation to test me, but could have been simply stating it as a matter of fact. It was hard to tell with Harrington. "I left just as your father returned," he continued. "They were both good men"

"Yes," I agreed.

"My grandfather was a baker at the Nabisco plant on Penn Avenue. He was run down by a street car walking home from work. The union arranged a job for my father so he could support the family. He was ten years old. He swept out the ovens. Someone held his feet while he scoured them with a brush – he was paid a nickel an hour. When he grew too big to fit in the ovens, he lost his job."

"Is that so?" I said, wondering what he was getting at.

Harrington frowned. We stared at each other for a moment.

"You know," I said, changing the subject, "more than a few people think you're getting off scott-free for the Gorman defense."

"Who?" he asked.

"People."

"Name them," he insisted.

"Oh, just people."

"You perhaps?" he asked.

"As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't have much to do with me."

"You think this is a game," he declared.

"It looks like a bunch of grown men acting like children."

"You can't take any of this very seriously."

"It seems to be something of an abstraction," I said. "Millions of dollars are involved, and people's jobs are at stake, but in the end it's just a clash of egos, a bunch of men trying to lay blame on each other."

"I do not see it that way," he said staring me directly in the eye. "I did what I did to defend Gorman from McAlister because I did not want to see a hearty manufacturing concern gobbled up by a foreign multinational. McAlister strikes me as the most offensive sort, with manor houses in England filled with antiquities and works of art, surrounded by manicured gardens like royalty."

"Do you know what McAlister's father did?" he asked. "He was a baker, and he probably began as an apprentice sweeping out the ovens just like my father once had." He looked me over once again. "All of this may not be important to you, but to others this is a serious matter," he said. "You can tell Theodore Rifkin he would be well advised not to try to implicate me in any of the Gorman suits. That will resolve itself presently."

"How?"

"McAlister U.S.A. is going to file chapter eleven tomorrow," he said

"Bankruptcy?"

"He can't pay down his debt. His real estate ventures are floundering and he overpaid on many of his acquisitions. The Gorman litigation will be put on the back burner while he restructures."

"What about the Gormans?"

"They took cash in the takeover. If they hadn't they would have to stand in line behind the banks and pension funds when McAlister restructures. They'll be happy they took the cash."

"So why are you concerned about the suits?"

"I know Rifkin," he replied.

"I don't understand."

"The Gormans may still have a legitimate case against the firm. If they choose to pursue it, Rifkin may feel compelled to spread the blame."

"So I'm to tell Rifkin to back off?"

"Yes," he replied.

"That's why you wanted to meet with me?"

He pushed his empty plate aside. "I'm also concerned about Blanton," he said. "I don't know how he thought he could have gotten away with it."

"With PanBank?" I asked.

He gulped down the rest of his wine and gazed at me with an artificial look of concern. "I taught him everything I know. He's a good attorney, smart enough not to have become mixed up with rogues like those fellows at McQuoid & Reed."



"Apparently he saw something there."

"That's what concerns me," he said. "Has he mentioned anything to you about Gorman that seems...unusual?"

"Such as?" I inquired.

"Oh," he replied, "anything that may seem...improbable," he said, with an affected flick of his spidery wrist.

"He hasn't mentioned anything about Gorman," I said, realizing he indeed had not. "I'll keep in touch if I learn anything," I said, not meaning it.

"I would appreciate that," he said with what was, I suppose, the best he could do to conjure up a smile.

I never did finish my salad. Harrington mumbled something about a pressing engagement and scrawled his name on the check. He virtually sprinted for the exit without shaking my hand good-bye.

I left the Rivers Club minutes later feeling a bit faint. My head still ached from the night before. There was a sour taste in my mouth. I'd hoped a little hair of the dog would make me feel a bit better, but the wine just left me feeling queasy, and more than just a little like a chump, an errand boy for Rifkin and Harrington and Blanton.

Of all the people I didn't want to run into on the street it was Phil Hendricks, my old pal from City Hall. He smiled wickedly as he shook my hand.

"I told you living up there in the clouds would do you good," he said, shaking my hand vigorously. "Look at you in your expensive suit," he said, looking me up and down, still shaking my hand. "Word is, you've been seen

around town with a blonde on your arm." He punched me in the shoulder. "Just don't forget us little people, chief."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "Don't go jumping to conclusions. And by the way, the blonde's a redhead – your cousin Jenna"

"Yeah, I know, big shot. I know," he said, smiling. "So what's it like in the big leagues?"

"It's not what you think. I'm doing grunt work mostly."

"Nice work if you can get it," he replied. "No, you hit the big one when you landed that job, buddy. You're the talk of the office. Didn't I see you in the 'Seen' column, mugging it up with some Heinz heir last week?"

"It must have been someone else."

"I coulda sworn it was you, partying it up with the rich and famous," he said, happily hiking up his trousers.

"I have a feeling it's going to be a short ride."

"What's with all the gloom and doom? Forget it. You're golden. Everybody says so. You're the envy of City Hall."

"Great, now I'm the poster boy in the City-County building."

"Hey, Chief," Hendricks said. "It's better to burn out than fade away." He cocked his hands like pistols, and shot. "Take it easy up there in the clouds." He smiled for me again, shook his head, and sauntered away happily. I couldn't be sure if he really was stupid or just terribly optimistic.

As I walked down the street damning Harrington and Blanton I noticed two shadows racing along the sidewalk. Looking up, I watched Boris and Natasha soaring on the updrafts between the buildings. For a moment they hung

on the wind, unmoving, screeching to one another, balancing on the air. Natasha tucked her wings close to her body and dove in a flash. Boris followed and they became two blurs until she opened her wings and made a graceful arc, rising twenty stories in seconds, Boris following behind.

I knew they couldn't have known I was watching, but I felt there was some significance to their aerial display. They seemed to be flying for the sheer joy of it. Their repeated dives were breathtaking. I stood in front of the fountain at One Mellon staring up at the sky, watching them while blue-suited businessmen passed by, looking at me as though I was touched.

When I returned to the office I found Kilmer in the office Harrington had occupied. He was in shirtsleeves loading files into cardboard boxes, his suit jacket neatly folded across a chair. "So what's up?" he asked casually, his broad forehead moist with perspiration.

"Oh, the plot thickens," I said nonchalantly, picking up a file and opening it. He snatched it back from me.

"How so?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"You're not holding out on me, are you?" he asked.

"Maybe," I said, smiling.

"What?" he asked. "What?"

"I've just heard something about McAlister," I said, proud of myself.

"The bankruptcy filing?" he asked, as though it was old news.

"How'd you know?" I asked.

"Goneggions," he replied, pressing a finger to his nose.

"Come on Kilmer."

"Come on what?" he snapped. "You want to know who told me? Well I ain't telling."

"Why not?" I asked. "I thought we were on the same side."

"Same side? You and me?" he exclaimed. "Yeah right."

"Okay Kilmer, what do you want."

"What have you got?"

"Nylons and candy bars, fraulein," I said. "I knew it would come to this."

"Hey. I just want to keep my job. I mean I have three kids. Times are tough. Do you know what these crooks pay me?"

"For Christ's sake, Kilmer, I can't tell Rifkin to give you a raise."

"Look, I want you to win this thing," he said sincerely. "I'm betting that whatever happens, you're gonna come out in a strong position..."

"So there are odds out already?" I asked.

"Let's say the line isn't in your favor at the moment."

"Oh, I see. So tell me, what's the Vegas line?"

Kilmer smiled.

"Three-to-one that you're Rifkin's hatchet man, and you'll be gone in six months."

"Meaning?" I asked, the sour feeling returning to my stomach.

"Meaning?" Kilmer chuckled. He stopped abruptly and motioned for me to close the door. "Someone's listening," he said.

"What?"

"A reflection in the window."

"Jesus Kilmer," I said.

"It's basic instinct," he said, shrugging. "Anyway, there's a couple thousand dollars down that you're Rifkin's stoolie and you're gonna do the same thing you did over at city hall." He pulled his finger across his neck.

"Look, I'm a free agent here. I find out which way the wind's blowing, report to Rifkin and I'm outa here," I said coolly. "He doesn't have to buy any of it if he likes. I know this though – I'm not going to be anybody's fall guy."

"I wish you luck pal. You're walking a thin line. You know what they say about biting the hand that feeds you." He paused. "Not that I'm not with you. I am, but you better be careful." He looked at me with a look that just might have been a look of friendly concern, then resumed putting files in the box. I watched the thinning hair at the top of his head. "But to answer your question," he said without looking up, "what I want is to be on the team. Let me fill you in on things. That's all I ask. If you succeed, I succeed." He looked up and smiled. "I'll win the bet of a lifetime."

"Great."

"We'll meet somewhere outside the office and I'll fill you in on everything," he said. I knew I was getting myself into something of an unholy alliance, but when you're surrounded by dishonest men, then you might as well ally yourself with the ones who tell you up front what they want.

I returned to my office, closed the door and let my head fall to my desk. As if the day hadn't been bad enough, Rifkin's secretary paged me. He wanted to

see me in his office. On my way down to 45, I ran into Goldfarb, who had been summoned also.

I hinted at the fact McAlister was going to file for bankruptcy and Goldfarb told me he already knew. "I have a feeling that's why we've been called to the principal's office," he said.

Rifkin motioned for us to come in and take a seat. He smiled absently for a moment, trying, I suppose, to seem congenial.

"Gentlemen, I called you here to tell you what I plan to tell the executive committee this afternoon – I want all suits regarding Pittsburgh-Gorman Industries against the firm settled as soon as possible. The less we worry about the litigation and stop wringing our collective hands, the better off we'll be."

"With all due respect," Goldfarb interrupted. "McAlister is going to file chapter eleven tomorrow. That will be in our favor."

"I know that goddamnit," Rifkin growled, "And I don't care. I don't give a damn if McAlister forswears all earthly possessions and gives all his money to the Roman Catholic Church. Whoever has the litigation attached to their piece of Gorman in the restructuring will look upon it as an asset to be exploited. We would be up to our asses in litigation for years, and we do not, I do not, need that specter hanging over this firm."

"But," Goldfarb interrupted.

"But nothing!" Rifkin roared, his gray eyes glinting. "I am still managing partner of this firm and I am going to order Litigation to settle."

"If that's what the executive committee agrees to," Goldfarb said. "But I advise against it."

Rifkin forced a smile and stared him down.

"My objective, and I think I've made this clear from day one, is to preserve the integrity of this firm. Settling these lawsuits will be a step in that direction."

The smile faded from his lips. "Do you understand?"

Goldfarb nodded, conceding defeat.

"Now, Jacob, as for you, you've played a valuable role initiating...discussion, I suppose that is the word I'm looking for here...discussion about the future of this firm.

"That is one of the reasons we took you on here and you've done a bang-up job." he smiled again. "You have done an excellent job. Keep it up. Now Stuart, if you will excuse us, I'd like a moment with Jacob." He smiled falsely.

Goldfarb left the two of us alone.

Rifkin smiled even more facetiously than before.

Goldfarb exited hesitantly.

"Is there something wrong?" Rifkin asked.

Goldfarb started to say something, but thought better of it, then exited the office, closing the door gently behind him.

The phony smile fell from Rifkin's lips as soon as the door shut.

"I'm surrounded by hyenas. They're all circling," he said, shaking his head.

"Being attacked by laughing hyenas isn't as funny as it sounds," I said, trying to lighten the mood.

The veins on Rifkin's forehead bulged and his face was an angry red beneath his deep suntan. The effect was cartoonish, like a villainous samurai in a

Japanese print. It took great effort to keep a straight face. Rifkin became visibly angrier.

"This is not a goddamned game, Jacob."

"I didn't think it was."

"I am going to restore order to this firm even if I have to do it alone. All of these sons of bitches are out to ruin me. All of them. One way or another, Jacob, they're out to get me. I tell you, be careful who you choose to do business with. Be very careful. They'll try to tear down everything you've built. Remember that, Jacob." He paused, realizing he was losing control.

"Oh, I'm already beginning to learn that lesson," I said.

He nodded, not caring a whit. "Now tell me what Harrington had to say."

I gave him a brief rundown of my luncheon date, including Harrington's warning not to drag him into the litigation. I also gave a brief report of my evening with Blanton. Rifkin listened, leaning back in his chair, his hands folded in his lap. When I finished, he sighed and suggested I ask more questions rather than sitting back and listening to these men.

"I find that, generally, the less you say, the more people tell you," I replied.

"Suit yourself, I just want you to come to me if you hear of anything that may undermine the integrity of this firm. Jacob, you work for me, not Goldfarb and not Blanton. If you side with them, I can make things very difficult for you. You want to make that young lady of yours happy, don't you?"

"Meaning?" I asked.



"Meaning, don't fuck with me, young man," he snarled, leaning forward in his chair. "Understood."

"Yes," I mumbled.

"Good...That will be all."

I left his office steaming. Kilmer appeared out of nowhere and told me to drop by Blanton's office.

"What?" I asked.

"They said they wanted to see you."

"They?"

"Blanton and Goldfarb. Brutus and Cassius do plot, me thinks," he said, smiling.

When I walked in, Blanton was pacing.

"See," he said. "See how fucked Rifkin is? You see it, don't you, Stu?"

"He's scared, Ed," Goldfarb replied. "That's all."

"Of course he's scared, he's afraid of being found out. Found out that he's a no good manager and a lousy lawyer," Blanton said. "I can't believe he wants to settle with the Gormans and McAlister. We didn't do anything wrong!"

"I agree," Goldfarb said.

"We fought that fucker McAlister off and made him pay the price for sticking it out." Blanton continued to pace about the room, bent over with his hands behind his back as though he were searching the carpet for something. His face was beet red and he occasionally tugged at the long locks of hair that fell from the back of his head. "Those goddamned inbred Gormans made out like

goddamned thieves. And they want more? That son-of-a-bitch Ronnie Gorman should be on his knees this very moment, blowing me out of sheer gratitude."

"I agree," Goldfarb said. "But the problem remains – Rifkin wants to settle. He's managing partner and he controls the executive committee. As long as he wields that kind of power, there's not a lot we can do. Not as long as he remains managing partner."

Blanton stopped and stared at Goldfarb.

"Are you suggesting?"

"It's been discussed," Goldfarb replied, a hint of a smile playing over his lips.

"Damn, Goldfarb, you are on our side."

"Whoa," Goldfarb protested, holding his palms out. "I have no intention of pulling off a coup..."

"That proves it," Blanton said, shaking his head.

"Proves what?" I asked.

Blanton looked at me as though he'd just realized I was there.

"It proves, my boy," he said to me, pointing at Goldfarb, "that he's been fishing around for conspirators to force Rifkin out."

"I have not," Goldfarb replied calmly.

"Yes you have. All you've ever wanted was to sit on the executive committee." Blanton turned to me, enjoying the situation. "His wife won't fuck him until he makes the exec committee."

"You've always had a way with words, Ed," Goldfarb said, avoiding Blanton's gaze. "It isn't gonna happen overnight. These things take time."

"I don't have time," Blanton hissed. "If Rifkin gets his way and these things get settled, I'm fucked – disbarred!"

"Not necessarily," Goldfarb offered, gazing absently out the window.

"How do you figure?" Blanton snapped. "By settling, Rifkin gives the impression there were improprieties in our handling of Gorman and PanBank. That would prejudice the fucking feds and the bar."

"Not necessarily," Goldfarb repeated, unconvincingly.

"Come on, Goldfarb. You've got enough sense to know it's true. If Rifkin gets his way and we settle, I'm done for. We've got to get rid of him."

"I don't know if this is the best time to discuss this," Goldfarb said, staring at me.

"Well, our boy Jake is going to have to make a decision sooner or later," Blanton said, as though I wasn't there. "Sooner or later he's gonna have to either flip or flop."

There was a long silence.

"I can't work as your agent in this," I said deliberately.

"What I think we're asking here, Jake," Goldfarb said, leaning forward deliberately in his chair, "is that you not let Rifkin get wind of any of this."

"I won't go running to Rifkin to rat on you. Far be it from me to get involved in firm politics."

"We can't make you do anything you don't want to do," Blanton said.

"There's no reason you should have to play a role in this, but we've got to be able to trust you. This could effect the lives of a lot of people around here, a lot of people, including you. You do realize, don't you, that once Rifkin has used you,

your ass will be out of here. When you go in for an interview and they ask what you did in your last job, you can't very well say you ruined the careers of several attorneys at the law firm where you worked."

"And?" I asked.

"What Ed is saying here," Goldfarb said, "is it would be in your best interest to pretend you never were a party to this conversation. We have a lot of clients who would be happy to take on a bright kid like you. All it would take would be a word from one of us. We can deliver, but only if we feel we can have your trust."

"I could have told you all along – I won't say a word to Rifkin. You can trust me. You have my word."

I walked out of Blanton's office a few minutes later feeling surprisingly light. I'd done it – I'd made the decision everyone had told me I'd have to make, and I felt a rush of relief. For that brief moment, I didn't feel I had to look over my shoulder all the time.

Then the same old doubts came rushing in again. Could I really trust Goldfarb and Blanton?

I walked the hallways of the firm for a while. Secretaries sat at their stations busily typing and answering phones. Associates toiled away in windowless offices in their shirt sleeves. Litigators spoke into Dictaphones, estate attorneys toiled to build financial legacies that would be squandered by the rich clients' shiftless heirs, labor lawyers crafted strategies to limit corporations' liability for workers' benefits they planned to lay off in their latest round of

downsizing. Men and women toiled ten and fourteen hour days just to have their first heart attack at fifty and die with regrets that they didn't spend enough time with their children. I wandered around the half-empty forty-eighth floor, past cartons of files left behind by attorneys who had been let go. From one of the empty offices, I watched a late afternoon party on a roof-top patio of one of the buildings below. The late afternoon sun shone on the party-goers, throwing long shadows.

The building was built early in the century by one of the last of the great industrialists, the rooftop patio one of the trappings of his success. But he never had the opportunity to enjoy it because pollution from his factories and those of his competitors had engulfed the city in a brown haze all year around. You had to change your shirt twice a day because of the soot. Someone once called Pittsburgh “hell with the lid off.” The factories were gone. The planters on the rooftop overflowed with flowers.

Party-goers held their drinks shielding their eyes from the sun, looking about at the city. There was no breeze. All was still.

Below them bankers banked and insurance adjusters denied claims, salesmen finagled sales to meet their monthly quotas, and secretaries were being yelled at for losing important calls and mangling English grammar. Throughout the central business district, millions, perhaps billions of dollars of business were being done. At the rooftop party below someone was thinking “one more drink and then I'll go back in and put in a few more hours.” I decided to go home.

## CH 6

On a cloudy Sunday morning in early August, some weeks after Blanton and Goldfarb's conspiratorial meeting, Sir William McAlister was found dead in his bathtub.

Jenna shook me from a deep sleep. I'd resisted, but after a brief tussle, she was able to communicate to me that McAlister was dead. When it registered, I sat upright.

"Where'd you hear?" I asked.

"On TV," she replied. "It's all over the news."

Without pausing to find my boxers, I dashed from the bedroom and down the stairs to the living room. Jenna was right – McAlister's death was all over the morning TV shows. On CNN, a reporter cataloged McAlister's massive global empire. Behind him a computer-generated graphic highlighted the dead billionaire's vast holdings – oil wells in the North Sea and Gulf of Mexico; timber in the Pacific Northwest and South America; steel mills in Pennsylvania and in the Southeast.

Jenna approached holding my boxers.

"There's nothing sexier than a naked man watching the financial news," she said.

I took the shorts from her, clicking through the channels looking for more news about McAlister. On another channel a British financial analyst was saying that with McAlister's death, his empire would crumble. The actual financial ruin

would be so massive, he predicted, the British government would have to intervene. He also predicted that because of the almost-certain investigation of alleged wrongdoings that had swirled around McAlister for years, any attempts by the estate to liquidate the vast holding company would be stalled. When asked when the British government might step in, the analyst predicted it would most probably happen immediately.

Jenna brought coffee as I clicked through the channels and tried to assess the implications. The billionaire's death in a bathtub on the other side of the Atlantic would thrust his empire into a legal maelstrom and inevitably, more trouble for Rifkin, Sampson.

As it turned out, Blanton was the big loser when the billionaire financier died. As soon as he heard of McAlister's death, he'd probably been glued to the television, hailing people around the country on the phone. Much later, I tried to imagine how he must have felt that morning. McAlister's death must have set off a thousand church bells tolling in his head, signaling the end of his dream. Perhaps he may even have realized that McAlister's death was just the first in a series of events that would lead to his own tragic demise.

That overcast, humid August morning had been to Blanton the antithesis of the bright sunny afternoon when Jay Gatsby showed his gleaming mansion to Daisy Buchanan for the first time, his mind sparkling with hopes that his long-held dream was finally within his grasp. In the end, Gatsby failed, and so too would Blanton.

It was only ten or twenty minutes after Jenna woke me that Blanton telephoned. He was frantic, damning his luck and screaming epitaphs about the British. In the background a child was crying.

"You've heard?" he asked over the din.

"Yeah," I replied. "What's it mean?"

He laughed.

"What's it mean?" he growled. "Hold on..." He yelled something, and the crying grew louder. "Christ all mighty, the sky is falling in on me and this place is a goddamned zoo," he yelled. His wife screamed a profanity and he shouted back. "Well take the kid outside damnit!"

There was a long pause, then silence.

"You still there?" I asked.

"Sorry," he grumbled.

"So what's it mean?" I asked again.

"It means the fucker's heart stopped," he replied. "If he ever had one to begin with."

"Come on," I said.

"Okay, for me, for us, what it means is this. The fucking Brits will be the typical tight asses they are about these things and take their sweet time untangling the estate. The U.S. operations are already in Chapter 11, but who knows where that will go." He paused. I could hear ice tinkling against glass.

"Are you drinking?" I asked.

"Wouldn't you be if you were me?" he asked.

"Gin?" I asked.



"Scotch," he replied

"Suit yourself," I said. "So what do you think will happen to the lawsuits?" I asked.

"Screw the lawsuits," he replied. "McAlister's family is so scared Sir Willie's naughty little secrets might be exposed, they may just drop their little suits all together."

"So you're not anxious?" I asked.

"Hell no! I'm the happiest guy in the world."

"You're not concerned?"

"Nope," he replied cheerily.

"If you're so happy, then why the Scotch?"

"Because, damn it," he blustered. "Look, I need you to do me a favor. Call Harrington and see what he has to say about all this."

"You want me to call Harrington?" I repeated. "Why don't you do it yourself?"

"Because," he ruffled. I could hear him take another sip. "I need to know what he says to you. I'll call him later, but I need to know what spin he gives all this. You'll do it?" he asked.

"Yeah...sure," I said.

"You're a buddy," he said. "You have his number?"

"Yeah," I replied.

"You're a real buddy," he repeated.

"Right," I said.

"Call me after you talk to him. Okay, bud?"

"Whatever," I replied.

"You're not mad are you?" he asked. "I'm just asking this one favor."

"Don't sweat it," I replied. "I'll call you back as soon as I'm done with Harrington."

After he hung up, Jenna bounded down the stairs, having listened in on the other phone.

"Why do you think he wants you to call Harrington?" she asked.

"I don't know," I replied, taking her hand and pulling her to the chair with me. She was wearing one of my dress shirts and hadn't brushed her hair or put on any make-up. It was a rumpled Jenna she never showed in public. I buried my face in her hair. It smelled of the bed. "There has to be more to it. He's scared of something," I said.

"Scotch before noon is a pretty good indication he's worried, unless I've really underestimated him," she said. "I don't think I'd like him. And I don't like the way you talk to him on the phone."

"Jealous?"

"I'm serious, Jake. There's a tone in your voice like you're on his side." She looked at me. "He's a dangerous man."

"He's...he's not bad. Just..."

"Just what?" she asked.

"Greedy. I suppose," I replied.

"Great," she said, pouting.

"What?"

"Don't even think of getting mixed up with whatever it is he's up to. Don't take his side."

"I'm not," I defended myself.

"I can see that look in your eyes."

"I'm not. I'm gonna call Harrington now, do you want to go back upstairs and listen in, my little co-conspirator?"

She kissed me and frowned.

"No."

I looked up Harrington's number and began dialing.

"Wait `till I get upstairs," she yelled as she bounded up the stairs, having changed her mind.

It was all for naught because Harrington's wife answered the phone cheerily and said he was out with their daughter and not expected to return until later in the afternoon. She offered to take a message, but I declined. Her cheeriness caught me off guard. It never occurred to me anyone close to Harrington, especially his wife, could be that bouncy.

Jenna whistled over the other line.

"Pretty saccharine, eh?" she said. Her voice was fuzzy.

"Talk about pollyanna," I replied. "I'm going to call Blanton back."

When I told Blanton Harrington wasn't home, he grunted and told me he was probably out looking at the chapel for his daughter's wedding.

"The invite's pinned right here on the kitchen wall," he said. "He loves that kid," he added absently. "Oh well, I guess there's nothing we can do today. If I were you, I'd drag that beautiful little redhead of yours back to bed."

He hung up and I held the phone, waiting for Jenna to say something.

"You know," she said, finally. "I don't like Blanton, but he does have a point there."

"There really isn't anything we can do about McAlister today," I agreed.

"Meet me upstairs?"

"How will I recognize you?" I asked.

"I'll be the naked one," she replied.

No one could have known the implications McAlister's death would have on the firm until several weeks afterward. And no one I spoke to was able to explain Blanton's strange behavior the day of the billionaire's death. They all attributed it to stress.

Even Harrington, who I was finally able to reach several days later, couldn't account for Blanton's behavior. His own conduct had been just as curious. I'd tried to call him several times that week. His secretary seemed to be as unaware of his whereabouts as everyone else. When I tried him at home, there was no answer there either. When he did reappear days later, he casually explained he had taken a short family vacation to New England, which seemed strange for a man whose only daughter was to be married in just a few weeks. He shrugged off my suggestion that his disappearance had been sudden or unaccounted for, and offhandedly changed the subject, inquiring if I'd heard anything more about the federal investigation of Blanton.

I told him I hadn't, and he grunted as though preoccupied with something else. When I asked him what he thought would result from McAlister's death he perked up.

"It could change the whole game," he said almost gleefully.

"The game?"

"People's perception of the Gorman situation," he replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Our role in the defense. Perception is everything. If in the long run, McAlister's so-called business acumen is seen as nothing more than smoke and mirrors, then the consensus will be that our attempts to save Gorman were in the right, almost noble, considering the circumstances."

"I never thought of you as an 'I told you so' kind of guy," I said.

"I am not," he replied coolly. "I'm thinking of Edward. If he can put this behind him and clear up that PanBank mess, he may be out of the woods yet."

"Your concern is touching," I said.

"Whether you believe me or not," he snapped, "my concern is sincere."

The line went dead and I sat in my office listening to the dial tone before hanging up. I called Blanton at home to tell him what Harrington had told me. One of his sources had confirmed that Harrington had indeed been at a resort in Vermont, or at least his wife and daughter had been. Apparently he'd taken a side trip to Montreal then caught up with them later.

"He's up to something," Blanton said.

"Any idea what?" I asked.

"You can't tell with that fucker," he replied. "He's sneaky. All my sources have come up empty. Anyway, if you find out anything, give me a call."

I said I would and hung up.

Blanton hadn't stepped foot in the office for weeks. He had nothing to do since he'd turned over his files to other attorneys, though his association with the firm hadn't been officially terminated. Rifkin spoke of him in the past tense, but for some reason had delayed action on the elaborate agreement he'd engineered for Blanton's disassociation from the firm. He wanted Blanton out but seemed unable to act.

While Blanton hid away at home, Rifkin spent weeks at a time in Florida on personal business. I had little to do in the office. I made a few phone calls around town and some to New York, but other than that, my time was my own. Jenna and I took long lunches, sometimes sneaking up to Prescott Street to make love. More often, we took our time over lunch at restaurants, or enjoyed the sunshine in one of the downtown parks.

Just when it looked like August would be a slow month, Kilmer suggested we meet after work to discuss what, in his words, "he could do for me." He insisted we meet at a bar of his choice where we could discuss things privately. Over my objections, he picked Chauncy's a meat market for middle-aged losers, by far my least favorite bar in town. When I told Jenna about our meeting, she insisted she come along, especially when I told her of Kilmer's choice of venue.

"If this guy thinks Chauncy's is the coolest place in town," she said when I phoned her, "I think I should go with you. There's no telling what he's up to."

When I asked Kilmer if he had any objections to Jenna tagging along, he was beside himself with joy. "Of course not," he beamed. "I've heard so much about her." I didn't ask him exactly what he'd heard. I didn't want to know.

As we entered Chauncy's, the bouncer, a hulking gorilla in a tux with a red bow tie and cummerbund asked to see our IDs and tried to look down the front of Jenna's dress while pretending to examine her driver's license.

Kilmer was seated at a table in a dark corner wearing a blue suit and sunglasses. There was a briefcase by his chair, which he firmly held onto with one hand. Because it was a Tuesday, the club was relatively empty. He stuck out like a sore thumb. It was embarrassing to have to make our way over to his table. The few patrons at the bar watched us. The barmaid pointed. A heavily made up former beauty queen sitting at the bar laughed a throaty laugh.

"Jesus, Kilmer," I whispered as we sat down. "This is not the frigging CIA."

"Hey Jake," he chirped happily. He looked at Jenna for a moment before taking off his glasses. "It's such a pleasure to finally meet you," he leered, leaning across the table to take her hand. "Jake, why haven't you brought her around the office?"

"Exactly because of this."

"It's nice to meet you," Jenna said, diplomatically. "Why don't you guys get down to business?"

"What's in the briefcase, J. Edgar?" I asked.

"If you're not going to take this seriously...", he sulked.

"Jake, honey," Jenna said, putting her hand on my arm. "Try to be serious."

I looked at her in disbelief. She smiled a sarcastic little smile.

"Would you like a drink, Jeffrey?" I suggested.

"Why...yes. Yes I would," he said. "Thank you Jake."

He laid the briefcase on the table as I motioned for the waitress. He opened the case, then abruptly closed it when she approached. "What can I get y'ins?" she inquired.

I ordered a beer, Jenna a gin and tonic. Kilmer had a rum punch or some sort of fruity drink with an umbrella. Once the waitress headed to the bar to get the drinks, he opened the briefcase again and pulled out a bound stack of documents. He handed it to me and I flipped through the pages quickly and realized why he was acting so strange. Those documents contained enough information to ruin Blanton and cripple the firm.

"What we've got here is proof Harrington and Blanton deliberately cooked Gorman's books during due diligence," Kilmer said. "That is fraud my friends," he whispered. "Dozens of SEC violations just for starters. And the stupid schmucks, had me make the photocopies! There's enough here to send them to the big house, and in the end their fatal mistake may have been that they didn't know how to use a Xerox machine."

"The big house?" Jenna said. "What do you mean?"

The waitress brought our drinks and Kilmer smiled appreciatively, leaning over the documents, to shield them from her gaze.



"I didn't make copies to blackmail them or anything," he said after the waitress left. "I knew they were important, so I made an extra set. I don't know what to do with them. I don't want to get those guys in trouble or anything."

"Maybe you just want to win your bet," I suggested.

"Well," he said, taking another neatly bound volume from his case. "I figured it wouldn't hurt if you had a copy."

"What bet?" Jenna asked suspiciously.

"It's no big deal," I said.

"It is too a big deal," Kilmer said enthusiastically. "Some guys at work have a little bet going on how Jake comes out of this whole thing."

"And you're on his side?" she asked.

"Of course!" Kilmer beamed. "We're partners."

"We are not partners," I growled

"Okay, so we're not partners," he conceded. "But I'm on his side."

"How reassuring," Jenna said weakly. "If you'll excuse me, I have to visit the ladies room." Before she turned toward the rest room, she glared at me as if to say, you made a bet, with him?"

Kilmer stood as she left the table. When he sat down he almost jumped, startled by my angry glare.

"What're you mad about?" he asked. "That Jenna is something else – serious talent."

"Talent?" I hissed.

"A knock-out," he said, shaking his head.

"Look, Kilmer, what do you want?" I insisted.

"Okay," he said. "I just think you should know the facts."

"Which are?" I asked.

"Well..."

"Well what?" I asked. "Kilmer, you're trying my patience."

"I was just wondering," he said, smiling broadly. "Are Jenna's breasts, like, those really firm ones?"

"Damn it, Kilmer."

"I love pissing you off," he said smiling. "You gotta understand, sitting on this stuff was killing me. I feel like I can breathe again. I'm giddy."

"I don't need this shit," I said, grabbing my volume of the photocopies.

"You hand me this hot potato and expect me to put up with your shit? The fact that you're in possession of these documents is a felony, an obstruction of several federal investigations. I could serve your ass up to Rifkin, or better yet, Blanton..."

"You wouldn't..."

"Watch me," I said, turning to go.

"Don't go," he urged.

"I'm tired of fucking around, Kilmer."

"I'll stop it," he pleaded. "I swear."

"No funny shit?"

"No funny shit," he said, palms up. "We...you need this information."

Jenna returned to the table as Kilmer began guiding me through the documents.

I'll give him this, he had been thorough. There were spread sheets with Blanton's and Harrington's handwritten revisions, overstating the value of the company's assets. They'd made dry oil wells look like gushers; immature pine forests appear to be overgrown with mature hardwoods; steel mills running at near capacity with steady back orders. Those papers documented the entire history of the fabrications made by Blanton and Harrington to make Gorman look like the goose that laid the golden egg. From the "real" balance sheets through the fudging of the numbers, to the final documents McAlister's people used as a basis for his takeover, Kilmer's little book contained enough information to ruin everyone.

"And there's more," Kilmer said, as though the entire weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders.

"What more?" I asked, wondering how many time bombs would magically turn up in my hands.

"PanBank," he said.

Jenna looked at me quizzically.

"You haven't told her about PanBank?" he asked.

"What's PanBank?" she asked.

"It's a phony bank Blanton and some guys set-up in the Far East," Kilmer said.

"But how does PanBank fit in with Gorman?" I asked. "If at all."

"I'm not sure," Kilmer said. "All I know is Harrington set Blanton and the McQuoid & Reed guys up with a former Philippine intelligence officer. There's a photocopy of his card in there," he said, leaning over, leafing through the volume.

After the copy of the card, which was mostly in Filipino, was a page with bank account numbers from banks in the Philippines, Malaysia, Pakistan and Bahrain.

"But Harrington told me he thought Blanton was crazy to have tried to pull off the PanBank scheme. He claimed to know nothing about it," I said.

"He had to have known something about it if he set Blanton up with contacts in Asia," Kilmer said.

"So Blanton and Harrington were in on it," Jenna said.

"No. Harrington had nothing to do with it," I said.

"But he just said," she said pointing at Kilmer.

"Nope. Harrington had nothing to do with it. I'm sure," I said.

"So he sets up Blanton, this schmuck from the `Burgh, with a former Filipino intelligence officer, just for kicks?" she asked, incredulous. "Someone's being played for a sucker here."

"But even the feds have cleared Harrington," Kilmer insisted.

"And the feds don't screw up, like every day," she countered sarcastically.

"Well, whatever the case," I interjected, "Harrington is not running scared. He's acting smug if anything."

"Maybe he's setting Blanton up," Kilmer suggested.

"Maybe he made it easy for you to get your hands on those documents," Jenna said.

Kilmer looked stunned.

"No," Kilmer said, dismissing the possibility. "They trusted me, they knew I'd never tell. Plus, I've seen some very smart men do some very stupid things."

"So why did Harrington introduce Blanton to the Filipino, and what was Blanton really after?" I asked.

"Money," Jenna suggested.

"Maybe," I countered, "but what was Harrington after? He's not that greedy, and he isn't the type to aid and abet Blanton's illegal activity."

"I've got a lot of friends in New York," Kilmer bragged. "Maybe they could help."

"If they're such good friends why haven't you found out already?" I asked.

"Well," he stammered. "I...do know some people."

"Hey, I believe you," I said.

"Me too," Jenna said, giving him room to save face.

"Give me their numbers. If we could dig something up it would be a lucky strike extra," I offered, though I doubted the value of his contacts.

"Yeah, a lucky strike extra," Kilmer said, lost in thought, probably wondering if he really had been misled by Blanton and Harrington. "Yeah."

We promised to meet again if we came up with anything new, but I insisted I pick the bar next time.

"What's wrong with this joint?" he asked. "This is a class establishment."

"It gives me hives," I said, throwing a twenty at him.

"It was nice to meet you," Jenna said as we made ready to leave.

"You guys going?" he asked. "The night's still young."

"Sorry," I replied, "this place is too happenin' for us."

Jenna giggled. Kilmer stared at us as we left.

"Too happenin'?" he asked, but we were halfway out the door.

That night Jenna and I lay in bed awake, unable to sleep. The moon was bright, and we'd opened the blinds to allow the uncharacteristically cool night air in. The room was illuminated by the pale lunar glow, and Jenna's white skin was luminescent in the moonlight – her shoulder, the hollow of her waist, her hip – I ran my hand along her side as she lay with her back to me. She rolled over and smiled, drawing her hand across my jaw and down my chest.

"Why do you put up with me?" I asked.

She smiled, looking me up and down.

"I love your body," she said, huskily.

I laughed out loud.

"No really," I said.

"Other than your body? I'm interested," she replied. "I want to be a part of it. I feel...I don't know."

"Do you feel you have to look out for me?" I asked.

"No," she said, sitting up, contemplating me. "You shouldn't think that at all. I have confidence in you..."

"Sometimes I'm glad you're there looking out for me," I admitted. "I need your perspective."

"I didn't realize that," she said, laying down again, thinking it over. She caressed my shoulder. "I want to be there for you, but I have to admit..."

"Admit what?" I asked.

She laughed and looked to the moon for the right words.

"The summer when I was 18, my brothers and I drove across the country," she said. "When we reached the Continental Divide, we jumped out of the car and just stood there for a while. It was really clear and cold even though it was the middle of the summer. My brothers both unzipped their pants and peed on the rocks, swinging their streams so they peed on either side of the divide. My oldest brother, Jimmy, was grinning like an idiot, saying he was peeing in two oceans at the same time. I was jealous because I knew I could never do that. Maybe I'm not saying it right, but I envied their power."

"You could have peed," I suggested.

"I know I could have," she replied, somewhat defeated. "I could have dropped my shorts and done it too. And of course, I realized it, like, by the time we got to Las Vegas, and by then I was kicking myself for not having done it. But I also realized it wouldn't have been the same. Confidently standing on the Continental Divide peeing is not the same as squatting there precariously balancing on the rocks." She paused and looked at the moon. "I guess that's why I can't entirely object to all of this."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I like feeling like I'm in the middle of something important. Jimmy, my oldest brother, you know, the one who's a stock broker? He's always saying he's a 'big swinging dick' on Wall Street. I want to feel like I'm a big swinging dick, too, but from afar."

"You're a very strange girl," I said, holding her close.

She sighed and stroked my hair. "I told you that a long time ago," she replied. We lay in bed holding each other as the pale moonlight illuminated the room, and fell asleep in each other's arms. I hadn't slept that well for months.

I'd hardly had time to make heads or tails of the photocopied documents Kilmer had given me, when another fortunate act of chance occurred. I was able to arrange a meeting with an agent from the Pittsburgh office of the FBI who was involved in the PanBank investigation. The initial contact was made through a series of intermediaries with the stipulation that the agent would not answer any questions that might compromise the investigation. He agreed, however, to meet me in order to bring the Firm up to date. I had a feeling the meeting wouldn't amount to much, considering how sensitive they seemed to be about maintaining their integrity.

Jenna and I took the bus into town together that morning. The weather had turned extraordinarily hot and humid, and what rain there was did little to dissipate the humidity. Overnight, the city had taken on the air of a rain forest. The hills were shrouded in clouds and the valleys were cloaked in dense morning mists. The air conditioning on the Shadyside Express was on the fritz. Even at 8:30 in the morning, the heat was oppressive. The passengers tried to remain as still as possible to keep from sweating. One of the brokers made a game attempt to read the paper, but abandoned it, folding the paper gingerly.

Jenna sat next to me, her eyes closed, holding her chin high, as though trying to will the heat away. I watched her, feeling like a voyeur. Her skin was pale, flawless. She had her hair up and her graceful neck shone with a pale



whiteness, as though sculpted from pearly marble. I watched her as the bus inched along the busway, following a lumbering railroad maintenance vehicle that crawled along the roadway surveying the railroad tracks that ran alongside. The bus's snail-like progress deprived us of the slight breeze that would ordinarily have blown through the windows as we sped down the roadway. I looked again at Jenna and closed my eyes, trying to burn the image of her sitting there into my mind should I ever be without her.

When I opened my eyes, I caught the squirrel man staring at her. He gawked for a moment before meeting my gaze, then averted his eyes and looked at his squirrel wife, and back at Jenna. He had a questioning look in his eyes that seemed to ask, "How come you get a redhead? Why can't I get a redhead?" I shrugged my shoulders and smiled, and to my surprise he shrugged and smiled back.

An hour later, I sat in a FBI office in the federal office building, waiting for a man known to me only as agent Williams. After several minutes, the receptionist said, "Mr. Gold, agent Williams." I looked up and it was the squirrel man! I stood and shook his hand trying to reconcile the imposing baritone of the agent I'd spoken to over the phone, with the meek squirrel man from the Shadyside Express who ogled Jenna.

Once we reached his office, he said so far they'd had no substantial evidence that Blanton had done anything more than draft the documents involved in the establishment of the PanBank holding company, the real estate deals, and the subsidiary companies. There were still cartons and cartons of files seized from McQuoid & Reed which had yet to be analyzed at the Bureau's New York

office. He said he couldn't tell me anything else about the case. That was his pat answer to every question I posed.

"So why take the bus?" I asked, trying to make conversation. "Don't you have one of those big G-man sedans with the tinted windows?"

"Only supervisors get government cars," he replied. "The bus is convenient. My wife's an attorney, and her hours vary, so..."

I nodded.

"And your girlfriend," he said.

"Yes?" I asked.

"She's...very attractive," he said.

"Yes, yes she is," I replied, wondering where the conversation could possibly go from there. "But back to Blanton..."

"Yes. Blanton," he said, sighing. "As I said before, he just seems to have been the legal brains of the operation. From what we can tell, he acted alone at Rifkin, Sampson, working with little aid except for occasional support from two associates who are no longer with the firm, and a paralegal or two. They've been deposed. I assume you know all of this."

I nodded my head.

"He drafted the papers of incorporation for the various PanBank subsidiaries and compiled the offering memorandum for the real estate projects, some of which, as you know were legitimate," he continued.

Again I nodded.

"According to the minutes of a meeting held at McQuoid & Reed in New York, Blanton also oversaw the formation of the banking subsidiaries throughout

the Pacific Rim and Asia. PanBank was associated with The Bank of Commerce and Credit International, BCCI, which as you probably know is now under investigation by the Bureau and several other international intelligence agencies.

"No one knows where the investors' moneys have gone. There are Swiss bank accounts, and the Swiss authorities are cooperating, they've been better about that sort of thing recently, but..."

"What about the toy company?" I asked. "Everyone seems to be puzzled about that one."

"Apparently," Williams smiled, "the toy company, Alexco, was legit. Named for Blanton's son Alex."

"Do you have anything solid on Blanton?" I asked.

"No," he conceded. "The money trail has dried up," Williams said, shaking his head. "There has to be some reason why two New York sharpers would work with a Pittsburgh attorney neither knew before the deal came down."

"But if our friends at McQuoid & Reed left such a massive paper trail, why don't you know more?" I asked.

"The bureau is in the process of evaluating the documents," he said.

"Are they dragging their feet?" I asked.

The Squirrel Agent sighed. "There's a turf war going on between the New York DA's office and our office there. The DA is caught up in a whirlwind investigation of BCCI and insists it's their jurisdiction. The justice department in Washington can't get its act together to get any investigation going at all. In the end we're left nowhere." He shrugged. "Our hands have been tied for so long it isn't funny," he said. "I've had nothing to do on this case for the last month. I've

wandered over to the courthouse to follow the Gorman bankruptcy proceedings just to see who's there, but I've had so much free time on my hands I've drawn-up complete plans for my garden next year."

"In the long run," I said, "do you think Blanton knowingly conspired with the guys at McQuoid & Reed?"

"In the long run I think he should be sent to jail," the Squirrel Man, opined, surprisingly vehemently. "He was greedy, and greed is a sin." He suddenly caught himself. "Of course this is all off the record."

"Of course," I assured him. "And in the meantime nothing is going to happen?"

"Not until the jurisdictional issues are resolved," he replied.

That was that.

He led me back out to the reception area. I shook his hand.

"Well," he said. "Maybe we can get together, socially, I mean, after all of this."

"Sure," I said, knowing we never would. I couldn't imagine what Jenna and I could talk about with the squirrel couple over dinner. He seemed to acknowledge this too, and smiled wanly as he saw me to the door.

When I walked out of the Federal Building the heat hit me like a punch to the gut. I literally had to stop and catch my breath. When I looked up, I spotted Daniel Harrington across the street talking with the attorney representing the Pittsburgh-Gorman pension fund in the bankruptcy proceedings. The two men chatted in front of one of the revolving doors of the massive Federal Courthouse

beneath an enormous art-deco eagle on the sandstone facade of the building. The bird seemed to stare suspiciously at the two men as they spoke.

I wondered whether they had inadvertently run into each other on the street, or had arranged to meet. Harrington could have been at the Federal Courthouse on other business, but something told me he was there for the Gorman bankruptcy hearings. He glanced across the street and recognized me, nodding his head almost imperceptibly as though he hoped the other man wouldn't notice. I decided not to push the issue and began to make my way down the street. When I got to the Gulf building I turned around to see if he was still standing there. He was alone in front of the courthouse as though debating whether or not to go in. He stood there vacillating before looking right at me, then walked into the courthouse. Even after he was gone from sight, I could still see the look he'd had on his face before he entered. He'd looked right at me as if to say, "Okay pal, you saw me going in. What are you going to do about it?"

Above me, one of the falcons soared across the sky, then dove out of view, mimicking Harrington's quick ascent into the courthouse.

## CH 7

September is a fickle month, not quite summer, and not yet autumn. Pittsburgh Septembers can begin exceptionally warm as the last remnants of sweltering, hot summers slowly ebb. Despite the heat, in early morning and late afternoon, there is a touch of October light, long shadows and muted, orangey colors that hint of the coming autumn.

September's extreme heat was one of the reasons cited for the marked increase in gang-related violence in the city. The evening newscasts invariably included at least one report from a crime scene with a policeman blankly staring at the camera, stating the heat probably had something to do with the rash of 18-year-olds shooting each other.

Otherwise friendly Pittsburghers were uncharacteristically cranky. Prolonged exposure to the heat and humidity was taking its toll. Jenna and I had our first fight. Whatever the cause of our disagreement, the next morning, we weren't speaking, having suffered a restless and resentful night.

By the time the bus arrived at our stop, my shirt was soaked through with perspiration. We were forced to stand on the un-air conditioned bus. Several people half-heartedly fanned themselves. The bible lady stared at the closed scriptures she held in her hand, as though debating whether or not to attempt to read the gospels. "Oh lord," she sighed, daintily wiping perspiration from her upper lip.

Squirrel agent Williams smiled politely and said hello, offering his seat to Jenna, who politely declined. I smiled down at him, and the mannequin in the

refrigerator on the hillside caught my eye. It was fully dressed, sitting on the refrigerator like a cowboy riding a bucking bronco. Outfitted in a heavy rain coat, it seemed to taunt us as we suffered through the heat. An ominous, deep red-lipped smile was painted on its lips, it looked down the trash-laden hillside like a demented child glaring at something it could not comprehend.

Though the bus whizzed past the mannequin on the hillside below, the image of its troubled expression remained fixed in my memory. Even Jenna, who had been silent all morning, turned and looked at me as if to ask if I'd seen it too.

"My god," she said.

"Yeah," I replied.

She took my hand, clutching it in hers the rest of the way into town.

"Let's not fight," I said.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Be careful today?" She held my face in her hands, looking into my eyes like a mother fearing for a child's safety.

"I'll be careful." I tried to sound reassuring.

"Promise?" she asked.

"Promise," I pledged, holding my hand up.

I watched her walk down Liberty until she turned the corner. In the short journey from Shadyside to downtown, we'd traveled an incalculable distance. I knew nothing would be the same again.

I stood on the sidewalk for a while watching pedestrians pass by. Their expressions were grim, intense, as though they could will their unhappiness away if they moved swiftly enough, hurried on to work where if they were lucky, the day would go quickly and they could go home to their wives and kids, their

lovers, their television sets. Only the old and the obese moved slowly, pausing now and then to wipe the sweat from their brows with a handkerchief. An elderly woman wearing a plastic coat and carrying a shopping net paused in front of me and sighed heavily.

"Hot enough for you?" she asked, flashing a toothless grin.

"Yes," I replied, smiling effusively, though I wasn't sure why. She cackled and I smiled again as she continued on her way. I didn't feel like going to work and took my time walking to the office, gazing in store windows and watching tardy office workers scurry by.

By the time I arrived at the office, I was forty-five minutes late. The receptionist said Rifkin had been looking for me for an hour.

"He's on a rampage," she whispered, as though he were hiding around the corner.

"He can wait," I said, cheered for some reason by her concern.

Her eyes bulged.

"Are you crazy?" she whispered urgently. "He fired his secretary and Jeffrey too."

"Kilmer?" I asked.

"Yes!" she insisted. "Rifkin accused him of stealing office supplies or something. It was crazy! He was just yelling nonsense, saying Kilmer wouldn't get away with blackmail. Blackmail! Can you believe it?" She shook her head.

"It was crazy."

"When did this all happen?" I asked.



"He's been on a rampage all morning." She glanced around and leaned close to me. "Do you think it's true? Do you think Jeffrey is blackmailing him?"

"Kilmer's not that stupid," I said absently, thinking of what to do first.

"He's sneaky enough," she said, nodding as if to confirm the verity of her words. "I wouldn't put it past him. That Jeffrey's a sneaky one, don't you think?"

"Careful," I cautioned. "That's how rumors get started. I'm sure Kilmer's got an explanation." I closed my eyes, trying to piece together some sort of game plan.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

I opened my eyes.

"Yes," I replied. "Did you say Rifkin was in his office?"

"You're going in there?" she asked.

"You have to take the bull by the horns," I said.

"What's that mean?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," I replied. She let out a short laugh and shook her head.

"Be careful," she added.

I assured her I would, and realized it was the second time in less than an hour that a woman had warned me to be careful.

On my way down to Rifkin's office I was accosted by Kilmer.

"Jake, I'm screwed," he said, taking hold of my shoulders.

"What happened?" I asked, ushering him into an empty office and shutting the door behind us.

"I don't know," he replied desperately. He looked like hell. The color was gone from his face and his hair was a mess. His suit was crumpled, he'd pulled his tie down, and the top button of his shirt was undone. He was having trouble breathing.

"Did he find out about the Gorman documents?" I asked.

He nodded, unable to speak.

"Who told him?"

"I don't know," he yelled.

"You didn't, did you?"

He shook his head without a word.

"Did you tell anyone else?"

"No!"

"Then how'd he find out?" I demanded.

"I said I don't know!" he repeated, flabbergasted, standing with his hands outstretched. He slumped onto the desk and lay back. "I'm screwed," he said, covering his eyes with his hands.

"Jeffrey, keep cool," I insisted. "Be a man about it and do everything Rifkin asks of you. The more difficult you are, the more trouble he can make for us. Both of us. Promise you'll stay cool?"

"Do I have to?" he pleaded, sitting up.

"Yes," I insisted, grabbing him. "If you don't, I'll make sure you really get fucked. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he replied. Discouraged, he lay back down on the desk.

"Okay," I said. "Give yourself five minutes, then go to the bathroom, wash your face, straighten up, and get back to work. I'll see what I can do. Okay?"

"Okay," he agreed. He sat up and touched my shoulder. "Hey, Jake, thanks."

"Don't thank me yet," I said, smiling for him as I stood in the doorway. "This could just be the beginning of the mother of all shitstorms."

"Thanks anyways," he said as I turned toward Rifkin's office. It was a long dreary walk to the other end of the building, but confronting Kilmer had at least put some of the swagger into me. I'd needed it to face the old man.

"Where the hell have you been? Do you know what's been going on here?" Rifkin demanded as I stepped into his office.

"I'm not sure I understand..."

"What's not to understand?" he shouted, his wrinkled face red as a tomato. "Do you realize what kind of absolute madhouse this office has become?"

I looked at him with the best, bemused expression I could muster.

"You don't have a clue, do you?" he asked, still red in the face. "Well, sit down and let me fill you in on a few things." He calmed down a bit, and something of a sarcastic smile crossed his lips. "I have a support service manager who keeps his own copies of confidential legal documents which, if anyone learned of their existence, could ruin every last man and woman in this firm. How's that for starters?"

"I thought Kilmer was rather too well informed," I said, hoping to sound convincing enough.

"God knows what that pathetic sycophant did with the documents." He shook his head in disbelief. "I've got a feeling that little shit kept them locked up in the basement of his little home. I can just imagine him filing them away at night while the little missus busied herself with those filthy little children of his. Have you ever seen those kids? They are filthy, absolutely filthy."

"I haven't had the pleasure of meeting the Kilmer family," I replied. "What sort of documents does he have?"

"You know nothing about them?" he asked again.

"No," I insisted. "Kilmer kept telling me he knew everything that happened around here, but I thought it was bluff. What were in the documents?"

"A good deal of information about the Gorman defense," he replied. "Certain damaging documents," he hedged. He sat back in his chair and rubbed his chin. "What worries me is he may go public with them. But I have a feeling the son-of-a-bitch will try to play one party against the other. That will be his fatal error. You know, after a while the nurse may learn something about medicine, but that doesn't make her a goddamn doctor."

"I think he's smart enough to know he wouldn't stand a chance against the firm if he tried blackmail," I said, trying to figure out whether he knew I had a copy of the documents. If he did know, he wasn't going to come out and tell me. I also wondered if Kilmer really did have more documents stashed away somewhere.

"Overall, Mr. Kilmer does not pose a significant threat. He can be dealt with easily enough," Rifkin continued, playing with his gold cufflinks. "I am curious, though, whether he offered the documents to anyone else." He stopped fumbling with his cuff link and stared across the desk at me. "Are you sure you knew nothing of this?" he asked.

"I don't think Kilmer likes me very much," I replied.

"That is not what I asked."

"He never approached me..."

"And you know nothing about the wager?"

"What?"

"Apparently there are odds out on all of this."

"I've heard of it," I admitted

"You know nothing about the documents?" he repeated, looking me warily in the eye.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" he repeated.

"Nothing."

"Good enough," he stated coolly, as if to say "I don't believe you but if you insist..." He shrugged his shoulders, then scowled. "And I suppose you'd like me to believe you don't know about our friend Goldfarb," he continued, leaning across his desk, a wry smile spread across his deeply tanned face.

I froze.

"What about Goldfarb?" I asked nervously.

He glared as I remained silent.

"Apparently, wifey kicked him out of the house. Apparently there's another woman. Do you care to guess who the offending female might be?"

"I can't imagine."

"Oh, I'd think you'd at least have an inkling."

"You give me too much credit," I said.

"Don't toy with me," Rifkin growled, losing what little sense of joviality he may have been building. "I'm a little tired of this disaffected attitude of yours. Don't toy with me, boy"

"I'm not toying," I bristled. "Who's the woman?"

"Lacey Jordan," he said. "Apparently since the missus threw him out two, months ago, Goldfarb has been sleeping in his office. Now, how is it no one brought this to my attention?"

"I just thought he was working late," I said, chuckling.

"I'll say he was working late. I knew I made a mistake the day I hired that young lady." He screwed his face into a grimace, as though the mere thought of her sickened him.

"She was trouble, that one," I added.

"If you play it correctly, a young woman like Lacey Jordan can be handled," Rifkin said. "I never blame the woman. It's men like Goldfarb who can't keep their penises in their pockets that are the real danger."

"What do you plan to do?" I asked.

"Are you sure you knew nothing about this?" he insisted. "Kilmer didn't tell you?"

"There were a lot of things Kilmer never told me," I replied. "And if he didn't tell me about Goldfarb, do you think he would have told me about the files?"

"I hope you're not lying to me, Jacob," he warned. "As for Goldfarb, I told him to hand his files over to Guliante and vacate his office by the close of business today. I've also called an emergency meeting of the executive committee for later this morning in which I will announce a realignment of that committee. Blanton's disassociation with the firm will take effect immediately. That and Goldfarb's resignation should take the wind out of the sails of any executive committee coup attempts."

"You've lost me," I said.

"I know about the meeting Blanton and Goldfarb had several weeks ago, which, I should add, you were a party to." He sat back in his chair and clasped his hands together on his lap, his fingers locked together. "I know Blanton was feeling out respective camps and I know Goldfarb was the initiator of a would-be coup."

I was dumb struck. My mind raced as I tried to determine who had informed him. Who could have turned? Rifkin must have realized what I was thinking because he smiled deeply as he rocked back and forth in his chair.

"How? Who...?" was all I could ask.

"Remember, Jacob, I told you early on that I know everything that goes on in this office. I had a feeling something was brewing, but for the moment, let us just say Goldfarb would be an easy mark at the poker table."

It was my turn to smile.

"What?" Rifkin asked, annoyed.

"It's just funny. the same thought crossed my mind the first time I met him."

"I've always said you were an astute young man," he replied. I wasn't sure whether he was being sarcastic or not.

"Without a job, I assume," I said.

"No," he replied, pulling himself upright in his chair. "I still have a need for you."

"I'm afraid to ask."

"No need to be afraid," he said, forcing a smile. "I need you to keep tabs, inform me of the actions of my new friend Edward Blanton."

"New friend?" I asked.

"I don't know what the bastard is up to," he said, invigorated by what he must have felt was the tide turning to his advantage. "But he either realizes he can't win, or he thinks he can pull one over on me."

I was floored by the idea of Blanton as turncoat.

"Didn't I warn you not to trust him?" he admonished.

"The man would eat his young," I said, shaking my head.

"Indeed," he concurred. Leaning over his desk, he looked at me with deep conviction. "I want you to stick to Edward Blanton like glue. He thwarted his own coup, but I don't trust him as far as I can throw him. And at my age, that distance is hardly considerable. Follow him. Hell, pal around with him if you have to. Just tell me everything. Understood?"

"What if I choose not to?"



Rifkin closed his eyes and shook his head. "Who do you propose to side with?" he asked warily. "Do you trust Blanton? The man who just turned on his own allies to buy a little time for himself? Don't you think he'd turn on you too? Goldfarb doesn't like you, and you never had anything to offer him in any case. That leaves Harrington, and let me tell you, you are not in his league, not even close. What if you choose not to assist me? Tell me, what would you do?"

I looked at him and shrugged.

"You and I both know you won't walk away."

"Perhaps..."

He shook his head.

"Jacob," he said, sighing. "Your future in this city could be decided by the events of the coming weeks. As you may know, it is very difficult to escape your past. Very difficult."

"There's no need for threats."

"I intended no threat," he replied, angered. "I've told you before that I respected both your father and grandfather, but I can't deny there still are a few people in this town who were not fond of your grandfather, and would not be displeased to see you fail."

"Meaning," I asked curtly.

"Just think very carefully about how you handle yourself. For all our sakes."

"I'll try to keep that in mind." Now I was angry.

"And Jacob, be careful with Blanton, he's dangerous."

There was a long, silent pause before he spoke again. "That is all," he finally said, without looking up. "Tell Kilmer I want him out of the office by the close of business today."

I left Rifkin's office, stunned by the morning's events. It was crazy. How could Blanton have known Kilmer had copies of the Gorman documents? And why had he turned against Goldfarb? If anyone stood to gain from ousting Rifkin, it was him. Instead, he'd turned on his own co-conspirators and delivered their heads on a platter to Rifkin.

Just when I thought I'd seen it all, one of them outdid the other. It was as though they thought it was the go-go Eighties and they were in the middle of a takeover war. This time, however, it was the future of the firm they were battling for. The irony was that the firm was no longer the crown jewel it once was. Like many of the companies that had flourished in the heyday of the takeover wars, the firm was suffering the realities of the '90s economy. It was facing decreased revenues, was saddled with excess office space in a high rent building, and suffering from a deep-seated morale problem. These men's struggle for control of the firm was in fact the final showdown – old wounds torn open again for the sake of settling vendettas that went back years.

If you look back on many of the mergers and acquisitions of the '80s, most were little more than maneuvers in a very costly game of one-upsmanship. A select group of men had engineered a series of corporate raids, each one larger than the next, many of which made little or no business sense, other than to prove that each deal was somehow bigger or better than the one that had come before.

McAlister had embraced heavy debt in exchange for outright acquisition of Gorman in a time when junk bonds and mega-deals were already out of style. It backfired and cost him dearly. But instead of learning from experience, these men were intent on settling old scores.

Pittsburgh is, in many senses an eastern city. They say it lags a year or so behind New York in the fashions of the times. But there is also a midwestern mind-set among the men who constitute the establishment of the city. In their eyes, New York is not all it's cracked up to be. Just because some merchant banker sneezes and every Wall Street analyst reacts by declaring last year's financial fad dead and another equally half-baked operating theory the new vogue, it doesn't necessarily mean the good men of Pittsburgh have to go along with it. The good people who toil daily on the confined spit of land at the confluence of the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers dress conservatively and possess a midwestern sobriety. The fashions of the times may come and go, but the gray demeanor of the city drives ever onward just like the rivers that flow past their gleaming buildings, their bridges, factories and cemeteries on their ceaseless journey to the sea.

When McAlister made his move for Gorman, he ignored the writing on the wall and more than a few Pittsburghers were heard to say "I told you so." As the final chapter of Gorman was played out, a different sort of barbarians were at the gate, and among them were a few who had old scores to settle. And Blanton was one of them.

I called him at home from Lacey Jordan's old office. As I waited for him to answer I couldn't help but wonder if she and Goldfarb had ever had any liaisons on the chair upon which I sat, or on the desk where my feet rested.

When Blanton answered, he sounded as if he'd been expecting my call. At the top of his spirits.

"What's shakin'?" he chirped.

"You know damn well what's going on," I snapped, surprised by my anger. "The place is going nuts. Secretaries are sneaking around corridors whispering. Rifkin's on a rampage...he fired Kilmer because of you!"

"Wait a minute," he interjected. "Kilmer got himself fired."

"That's open to interpretation."

"Ahh, he's resilient," Blanton said. "He'll land on his feet."

"How long have you known?"

"About?"

"About the documents," I replied. "Damn it, Blanton, quit the horse shit."

"Not long after he gave you a copy," he replied.

"You knew I had a copy?"

"Yup," he chirped.

"Does Rifkin know?"

"Sure."

Silence.

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"Honestly?"

"Sure. What did you tell him?"

"I told him I didn't know a thing about them."

"Damn right."

"Shit," I muttered.

"Now he has something on you."

"Shit," I repeated. "And I guess you have something on me too."

"I'd never..."

"Well you turned on Goldfarb," I shouted.

"Careful," he warned. "The walls have ears, remember?"

"You did turn on them," I whispered insistently.

"I never liked them though," he replied. "You I like."

"That's what scares me."

He laughed. "Relax pal. Tell you what. Come on over for drinks after work. I'll fill you in."

"Fill me in on what?" I asked.

"Everything," he replied. Over the phone, I could sense his growing confidence. No more than a month before, when McAlister had kicked the bucket, he had been absolutely beside himself. Now I couldn't fathom what was going on his mind. I promised to meet him at his place later, then waited for the next bizarre turn of events to unfold.

It didn't take long. The third bombshell of the day was Rifkin's announcement of the "restructuring" of the executive committee. I was not privy to the actual proceedings. After all, my main source of information, Kilmer, was

at that very moment cleaning out his little office, stricken by the immense grief of having been found out. Despite this, I learned of the fallout from the meeting not long after it recessed.

During the course of the conference, Rifkin had accepted, with great sorrow of course, Goldfarb's resignation. He then stunned those assembled with the news that William DeCarlo, a rainmaker with local political connections would be joining the firm as a nameplate partner. In addition, Rifkin announced, with great sorrow, the retirements of Messrs. Sampson and Wells. As a result, the firm would be known thereafter as Rifkin, Kelly and DeCarlo.

I called Jenna and told her the news and that both Blanton and Rifkin knew about the Gorman documents Kilmer had given me. She asked me if I still had a job.

"Unfortunately, yes," I replied.

"Don't joke," she replied. "At the end of the month, I'll be out of a job. They're closing the gallery."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope," she replied. "The bottom dropped out of the market years ago. We've been squeezing by but it's gotten worse."

"So..."

"So...I don't know," she sighed wearily. "We both could be without jobs pretty soon."

"What are we going to do?"

"Oh, Jake," she sighed. "Do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Don't do anything stupid."

"Me? Stupid?"

"You know how I feel..."

"How do you feel about eating?"

"Don't worry about that. Just don't get yourself screwed up with those bastards."

"Well I am screwed up with them. Rifkin knows about the Gorman documents. He knows I'm holding."

"Oh, Jake," she sighed again. "What are we going to do?"

"We'll jump off that bridge when we get to it. Meanwhile Blanton wants me to go to his place for drinks after work..."

"Don't. Blow it off."

"I can't."

"Jake. You can."

"I've already committed..."

"You want to go, don't you."

"I have to go."

"Be careful Jake," she warned. "He'll screw you just for kicks."

"Yeah probably," I said absently.

"No," she insisted. "Definitely."

There was a long and uncomfortable pause.

"I love you, Jake."

"I love you, too."

As if I hadn't lived a lifetime on that September day, I drove out to Allison Park to keep my appointment with Blanton. I slipped out of the office amidst the bedlam and drove out to his house.

I eased my car down the long gravel drive and parked in front of Blanton's Jaguar in the turn-around in front of the rambling house. I was greeted at the door by a maid or nanny, a slim, attractive black woman with a Caribbean accent, dressed in what I guessed was a fashionable outcast from Mrs. Blanton's wardrobe.

"Mr. Blanton is on the patio," she cooed in her lilting voice. "Dis way," she said, leading me through a walnut-paneled living room filled with richly appointed furniture that could have been pilfered straight from the Duquesne Club. As I admired the room I noticed that the legs of most of the furniture were scratched or chewed upon. At the time I noticed this, the muffled silence was broken by the scratching of claws as a pack of dogs scrambled into the room.

A kaleidoscope of brown, black, cream, yellow and orange fur burst around the corner and attacked me with wagging tails and wet tongues. Five noses sniffed at my clothes and I petted and slapped five extremely happy and rowdy dogs at once.

"AmieeAllieBuddyHamletSam," the nanny warned in her singsong voice. "Leave de young man alone."

"Hamlet?" I asked. "Which one's Hamlet?"

"The worst of `em all," she said, grabbing the rowdy black Labrador retriever by his muzzle. "I named him myself," she said proudly. "Come, I'll take you to Mr. Blanton. We'll take the mutts with us," she said.



The dogs were anything but mutts. Each was a magnificent specimen. They noisily followed as she led me through the spacious kitchen to a mud room where a couple of the dogs stopped to lap noisily from the several water bowls arranged on the tile floor. On the patio, Blanton lay asleep in a chaise lounge.

The dogs happily attacked him and he woke as though he hadn't been sleeping at all, shooing the dogs away. Sitting up in his seat he greeted me, though he didn't stand. He reached for a glass on a low table beside him and knocked it to the brick patio. Instead of shattering, the cup bounced harmlessly on the bricks. The ice cubes melted into pools.

"Plastic," he said, holding the glass as though he'd just discovered Californium. "You can't have anything breakable with the dogs and the kids. Isn't that right, Bertha?"

"Don't forget grown men who never grew up," she added.

"Very funny lady," he said. "Please get me another Scotch and whatever young Jake here wants."

"I can get it if you show me where," I offered.

"Please," she said rolling her eyes heavenward. "Just tell me what you want. I'll get it."

"Go ahead, Jake," Blanton said jovially. "She's an expert. Just name it, she'll make it."

"Campari and tonic," I said.

"Jack Daniels here don't have any of dat fancy liquor." She pointed a thumb at Blanton.

"Jack and ginger?" I asked.

"Dat we can do." She sauntered into the house.

"She's something," I said. Blanton gestured for me to sit on the other chaise lounge.

"She ought to be, I pay her a fortune." He seemed happy with himself.

"She's good with the kids."

"You surprise me," I said, taking a seat.

"Why? Because I'm a good provider? Well I am, damnit. I am."

"It's not that. I just never thought of you as some sort of baronial master."

"Baronial...I like that. Aye, let's drink to the Baron," he said as Bertha emerged from the house with a tray.

"One for Baron Von Jelly Belly," she said, handing Blanton his Scotch.

"One for the young man with the tired eyes," she said handing me mine. "And a third for the beautiful fool who waits night and day on whitey and his little kiddies," she said, taking the third glass from the tray and sitting back in an iron patio chair.

We sipped our drinks in silence admiring the late sunshine as beads of condensation gathered on our glasses and fell to the ground, darkening like drops of blood on the brick pavers.

Sitting there in the fading sunlight of the late September afternoon, drinking and watching Blanton swat at an occasional bee, I was reminded of Coleridge's Kubli Kahn. Blanton looked like the noble Kahn, ensconced in his chaise lounge, his belly showing through his shirt, a drink in his hand.

"In olden days did Kubli Kahn build a pleasure dome?" I asked, stumbling to remember the words.

"Ah, no," Blanton purred. "You've mangled it," he said, shaking his head. "You're a real piece of work, you know that, Jake?" He turned in his chair to look at the nanny. "Bertha, do you believe this guy? He knows just enough to pull off the snow job. He's got `em all fooled."

"But you know better," I said.

He smiled and leaned his head back, his eyes closed.

"In Xanadu did Kubli Kahn  
A stately pleasure dome decree  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea."

It was silent for a moment. I looked at Bertha, who shrugged. Somewhere behind us the sounds of children playing could be heard. Bertha stood to go inside.

"This is what I love about all this," he said, sweeping his arm in a grand motion to include his rambling estate. "I grew up in a row house on a hillside above the mill. It had aluminum siding, a rusted cyclone fence and maybe twenty square feet of grass. I always wanted to live in a big house on a big piece of land."

He'd accomplished that. The house was a long two story number, built of whitewashed brick to a plan not unlike the design of many undistinguished sprawling houses you often see in high income neighborhoods. To call it French colonial would not be an apt description, but more accurate than, say, southern colonial.

The slate roof was punctuated with several chimneys. The lawns were expansive and the house was set a good two acres off the road. The gravel drive

ran straight from the street to a detached four car garage with a chauffeur's apartment that the children used as a play house. Apparently Blanton parked his Jaguar in front of the house more often than he used the garage. Whether he was too lazy to park the car in the garage, or he liked those driving by on the road to see his impressive car, was hard to fathom. Both possibilities seemed apt.

Adjoining the back of the house was the patio. Beyond the patio was a fenced-in tennis court. When I asked Blanton if he played, he waved his hand and said no, as though the thought was offensive. From the size of his stomach, which in casual clothes looked even more substantial than it did when he wore a suit, it was apparent he took little interest in exercise.

"The wife plays," he said. "She's nuts about it. We belong to a club too. She's outside so much in summer, her skin looks like one of those Egyptian mummies they've unwrapped."

Beyond the tennis court, the lawn fell away in a gentle slope. Two or three more terraces stepped down to a small pond, guarded at the back by a pine wood.

"So what now?" I asked. "You seem to have chosen to get into bed with Rifkin."

"A necessary evil," he said, disinterested.

"God knows I hate to ask, but what's the grand scheme?"

"Gorman," he replied, a wide grin spreading across his round face.

"What specifically about Gorman?"

"The whole shooting match," he replied.

"You've lost me."

"I'm going to take Gorman,"

"Take it? You can't possibly believe you can take it over," I said.

"Not only do I believe I can, I know I can," he replied. "I virtually have already. As of today I control a majority of Gorman's junior debt. Only my group can pull off a restructuring and bring the company out of bankruptcy. And only my group can block any other restructuring plan."

"You've lost me." I said. "Pretend I don't know anything about bankruptcy restructurings, corporate debt, anything."

"See pal, I told you. You lead everyone to believe you know it all, but you don't know squat, do you? Okay Einstein. This is your lesson in 1990s economics— Gorman-Pittsburgh Industries is in bankruptcy which means their debts are greater than their assets, right?"

I nodded.

"Now, there are several different classes of corporate debt. And those who hold the debt – the company's creditors – are paid off in order of the seniority, or importance, of the debt they hold. The senior debt, loans backed by corporate assets, is usually held by big banks. They don't want to own a bankrupt company. They don't want to own any company. They only want to collect on their notes. If the banks tire of the game, they'll sell. These debts get paid off first in the restructuring, and that takes up all the value of the company. That means they have nothing tangible to offer the holders of the junior debt, except stock in the reorganized company.

"Because of this, the real players for the new, reorganized company are the holders of the junior and equity debt. Junior debts are held by bondholders,

suppliers who are owed money, and to a lesser extent, shareholders and the pension funds. Once a company declares bankruptcy, the holders of these second-tier debts usually sell their holdings for pennies on the dollar, glad to get money on the spot rather than having to wait to collect the money owed to them, which they may never see. Likewise, the suppliers who are owed money will usually sell that obligation to someone else in exchange for cash which they need for their own cash flow – to pay their workers, their suppliers, and so on."

"And you own all this debt?" I asked.

"I've bought a lot of it. I've convinced others to buy chunks or have secured commitments by investors to buy what I'll need. So I control enough to keep the opposition at bay."

"And you will be able to call the shots on how the company restructures its debts?"

"Right. But I plan to take over management. Those fellows did it with Allegheny International. Right?"

"Yeah, I suppose," I said. "But who's your competition?"

"For Gorman?"

"Yep."

"Harrington."

"Harrington's trying to take Gorman too?"

"Yes."

"So that's why he's been acting so squirrely lately?"

He sipped his drink and nodded.

"Now you're catching on," he said.

"But what about the holders of the senior bank debt?" I asked.

"I've had verbal agreement from a majority of the senior debt holders that they'll support my plan," he said, satisfied with himself. "Hell, they just want their money."

"And does Harrington know about you?"

"That's the beauty," Blanton said, almost giggling. "I won't reveal my hand until tomorrow when I file my restructuring plan. His stake in the unsecured debt won't mean shit."

"So he doesn't suspect anything?" I asked.

"I imagine he may suspect I hold some of the debt, but I've been buying through different sources to cover my tracks."

"So while others were courting Harrington, you were busy accumulating Gorman debt."

"Correct," he replied.

"So why side with Rifkin?"

"He wanted to keep his power base in the firm," he replied, shrugging it off. "By turning against Goldfarb, I traded him my ass for his security."

"He cleans house and you get...what?"

"McAlister's heirs have no case against me. Likewise the Gormans. Only the firm has a chance of getting a judgment against me, but now they won't," he reported.

"What about the real estate scam?" I asked. "Remember? The Feds?"

"I didn't do anything wrong," he replied defensively.

"So where'd the money for Gorman come from?" I snapped.

"Investors."

"From where?"

"Off shore."

"Off what shore? Did you track down your friends from McQuoid & Reed?" I asked.

"Very funny son," he replied with surprising good humor. "No, my financing's legit."

"Honestly?"

"I swear to god," he replied, holding his hand up in an oath.

"Okay, so how long have you been planning this?"

"It had its germ during the Gorman defense. We were doing anything we could to throw obstacles in McAlister's path. The strategy was if he eventually took the company, the debt load would be too big for him to swallow. Eventually it would drag him down. One night while we were going over the numbers, Harrington remarked that if Gorman ever went under, we'd be in a good position to advise anyone interested in taking it, because we knew more about where the company's real value lay than anyone else. We both stopped and looked at each other. You could almost hear the light bulbs switching on simultaneously."

"So that's why Harrington was so interested in what I knew about you," I said.

"And that's why he disappeared in August right before his daughter's wedding," Blanton added. "He was in Montreal drumming up financing. He holds a small amount of unsecured debt, but he's aligned other debt holders on his



side, and is angling to lead his own restructuring plan. But he doesn't know I hold enough debt to stop him dead in the water."

"What about his allies?" I asked. "Won't they stick by him?"

"The guys who invest in the debt of bankrupt companies are vultures. They don't want to run the company, they just want to buy low and sell high. Once I come forward with a more attractive buy-out of the debt, they'll leave him and flap over to me. I mean those guys really have no hearts."

"Imagine!" I said mockingly.

"Facetious little bastard," he said, smiling.

"So you take Gorman for yourself, the Federal investigation of you and the McQuoid & Reed guys is dead in the water, and you've got Rifkin off your back. You're set," I said, shaking my head at the thought of Blanton coming out as the big winner.

"Exactly."

"So how'd you know about the documents Kilmer gave me?" I asked.

He smiled in the fading light of the evening. The smell of dinner cooking wafted out onto the patio from the kitchen.

"It's that girlfriend of yours," Blanton said, examining his fingernails.

A sinking feeling filled my stomach.

"I can still fuck up your little plan," I warned him. "So you'd better tell me the truth." I rose to my feet. "What does Jenna have to do with all of this?"

"Calm down, buddy," he said defensively. "Sit down. All I meant was you've been spending too much time with her. I arranged to have someone take a little look around your place."

"You had my apartment broken into?"

"You had the documents locked in the filing cabinet in your bedroom, right?" he asked.

"Jesus Christ on a crutch, Blanton, that's breaking and entering!"

"What are you going to do? Call the police and tell them documents you obtained illegally were stolen from your apartment? Think about it, Jake."

"Jenna didn't know anything about it?" I asked.

"No!" Blanton reassured me, shooing the idea away with both hands.

"She's just your piece of ass."

"Watch it."

He laughed.

"Relax," he said. "I meant it in the best...you know what I mean.

Anyway, I want to make it up to you."

"How?"

"I want you to work for me."

"No way."

"Come on. Quit acting like a child. Be smart. You'd be valuable."

"I don't I want any part of it," I said, wondering whether or not I really did.

"Think on it," he said. "But promise me you'll keep everything I told you to yourself. At least until tomorrow." He looked at me and smirked.

"I can make you a very rich man. Remember that. You and I are more alike than you would like to think," he continued, looking me squarely in the eye.

"I can make Gorman an example. I have plans. And you could be there." He

frowned and shook his head. "Doesn't any of this appeal to you?" He extended his arm in a sweeping motion. "I know you wouldn't mind having a Jag or a Porsche. Damn, just think how Jenna'd look riding around in a little roadster. You could make a bundle of money."

"Money isn't everything," I said, sulking.

His eyes widened. "Yeah, but it's a lot. Look, you're idealistic right? You wanna do the right thing don't you? Well, this is right as rain. Look," he said, sitting up. "You want things to be different. So do I. Okay, so I lost my way there for a while, but the truth is, you either end up living in a trailer park wondering what the hell ever happened to your life, or you grab the world by the balls. This is your chance to take the bull by the cahones. We could create a company that does it the right way – none of the political bullshit, none of Rifkin's shit. Just imagine a company that doesn't screw the little guy. We could make Gorman a model for the next century. Doesn't that appeal to you?"

He looked me over for a moment, then grimaced. "Whatever," he sighed. "Look, take your time. Think about it." He sighed and waved both hands at me. "Look, you can be a schmuck and walk away from your chance of a lifetime." He paused and averted his gaze. "I don't like getting in bed with a son of a bitch like Rifkin, but it has its strategic advantages."

"Such as?"

"Keeping people in their place."

"Shit, Blanton. You realize you're as bad as him."

"Yeah," he laughed. "I know, but I've gotta do it, Jake."

I tried to think of my options and couldn't come up with any alternatives. There was nothing I could really do. The best I could do was to step aside and try to be out of the way.

"Just promise – you don't know a thing, right?"

"Sure," I agreed. "Mum's the word."

"I know I can count on you," he said, as though he were convincing himself he could. A few of the dogs sauntered out onto the patio and sniffed at the air before laying down. The smallest one, some sort of a shepherd with large perky ears padded over to Blanton and jumped onto his lap. He cooed in its ear as he rubbed its neck and stroked its head. Bertha emerged from the kitchen wiping her hands on an apron and called the children in for dinner.

In the kitchen a deeply tanned woman with bleary eyes drank from a glass filled with four fingers of Scotch. She stood immobile, staring into space, and I realized she was Blanton's wife. She looked eternally unhappy.

I realized Blanton's whole escapade was not as much about revenge or greed as it was about proving he was still the meanest motherfucker in town, that he still had it. Here he was, a father of three, this husband of a well preserved suburban wife, an attorney who proved them all wrong too early in his life. His "model" Gorman was an apparition. His vision of Gorman the shining corporate citizen was as much a lie to him as it was to me. He wanted to take Gorman just for the sake of proving he could.

He was lost in thought, absently scratching behind the ear of the dog that stood upon his belly like an intrepid alpinist standing atop a mountain peak. I looked again at his wife standing in the kitchen, only half-heartedly

acknowledging her children, and wondered if she ever looked at him and asked herself 'when did it all change?'

At some time in their lives the world must have seemed one enormous promise. And at some point they must have realized that opportunity had passed them by and they could never go back. Never. I could not face the possibility of someday looking back on that September evening and wish I'd made a different decision. No matter how tight the screws were turned, I would not tie my fate with Blanton's. I couldn't.

I promised to keep his scheme under wraps, and we shook hands. I left him to go into the house and have dinner with his family. Standing in the drive, I could hear them. They sounded like any other boisterous upper class clan enjoying a meal together. The stars were beginning to come out. A few late crickets chirped in the falling darkness. I took in the panorama of the Blanton estate – the vast grassy lawns, the house blazing with light, the neatly trimmed bushes hugging the house, Blanton's Jaguar and his wife's convertible parked haphazardly behind his in the drive. She'd driven off the gravel and onto the grass, running over one of the children's dolls. Two tiny arms and a leg lay in the blue grass where they'd broken off. The naked and broken plaything lay on its back staring blankly, open eyed, at the killing moon.

## CH 8

All's fair in love and war and bankruptcy. Edward Blanton would learn that in the most terrible way a man can reap the realities of a life lived on the edge. When you take enormous risks and succeed, everyone wants to congratulate you for a hand well played. But if you fail, friends and flatterers fade into the woodwork and leave you to the buzzards circling overhead. In his play for Gorman, Blanton literally found himself dealing with vultures, investors who buy and sell corporate debt for profit, and who proved to be the most heartless and least loyal of the whole bunch involved in the fight for control of Gorman.

Some of the scavengers circling the carcasses of bankrupt companies in the '90s were the same arbitrageurs who had been accomplices to raiders like Sir William McAlister in the '80s. Buy low, sell high, and take no prisoners. It was their credo. When there was a lull in hostile takeovers, these guys simply replaced vicious stock trading with the equally ferocious buying and trading of corporate debt.

With only a few glitches, Blanton's scheme went according to plan. He delayed submitting his restructuring plan to the judge overseeing the Gorman bankruptcy a few days to further build his war chest. As he had earlier, he made these buys using middlemen to maintain anonymity. According to conversations I'd had with Harrington and with some of the people Kilmer had put me in touch with in New York, the identity of the mystery buyer was a hot topic among both the vultures involved in the McAlister bankruptcy, as well as those watching from the sidelines.

One of Kilmer's contacts told me that more than a few of the players thought Harrington was the mystery investor. I didn't make any attempts to make him believe otherwise. If anything, I may have said some things to lead him to believe Harrington was the mystery vulture.

Although I thought Blanton was crazy to want to take Gorman, I have to admit it was exciting to be in the midst of it all, watching him play liars poker with Gorman as the multi-million dollar prize.

In the days after Rifkin single handedly rearranged the firm's power structure, things settled into a surreal calm. The office was like a strange combination of a field hospital in a war zone with dazed soldiers stumbling about, and a huge denial factory in which everyone pretended nothing had happened at all. I'd seen the same behavior in City Hall after the new mayor took office. People literally whistled when they passed Rifkin's office like peasants scurrying past a graveyard.

I don't quite remember what I was doing the day I got the call to get down to Rifkin's office on the double. I suppose I may have been letting my mind wander, watching a late summer thunderstorm make its way up the Ohio valley. I was on my way out the door when my phone rang again. Blanton was on the other line, frantic. I told him I had to get to Rifkin's office and couldn't talk. He cursed Rifkin up and down.

"Ed, I really have to go. What's up?"

"The fuckers turned themselves in this morning!" he said frantically. "I'm fucked. They're going to fuck me!"

"Who turned themselves in?" I asked.

"The bastards from McQuoid & Reed," he yelled. "They showed up in Manhattan this morning. They're gonna turn state's evidence."

"Against you?"

"Oh, Christ. Yes. You have to...you have to..."

"I can't..." I said. "I gotta meet with Rifkin."

"Meet me after then," he urged. "Meet me at Chip's. In the Grant building."

I didn't like the thought of drinking with Blanton in the middle of the day, but I was in too much of a hurry to say no. I agreed to meet him and ran out the door.

Rifkin sat at his desk, his jaw firmly set, staring into space and rocking like some predatory insect eyeing its prey. I cleared my throat. He looked up momentarily then lapsed back into his trance. The only sound was the rush of air through the ventilating ducts. Outside, the sky was darkening. The rumble of thunder was muffled through the thick, tinted windows. Raindrops began striking the window, and as the storm increased in intensity, the rain struck the windows like stones.

"I attended one of those terrible retirement parties for a friend recently," he said. "One of the speakers opened his speech by saying that soon after retiring, he found it surprising how quickly one went from 'Who's Who' to 'who's he?'" He shook his head. "I thought that was terrible."

The sky outside darkened and the rain fell in sheets. "A few years ago, the men in this firm were busy accumulating those acrylic paperweights they hand



out when corporate financings are closed. Every time they close a deal, these paperweights with miniatures of the announcement they publish in the papers embedded in them are handed out. They call them 'tombstones,' an appropriate term, considering..." He smiled. "Some of the attorneys here have dozens of them. Over the last few months I cannot tell you how many of them I have seen packed into boxes or thrown away by men who found themselves out of a job."

I said nothing. Rifkin looked thinner, gaunt. His usually tanned face seemed pale, even sallow, and I noticed for the first time that his finely tailored suits were hiding an appallingly thin body.

"Blanton's friends from McQuoid & Reed turned themselves in this morning," he said, looking at me for the first time.

"I know," I replied. "Blanton just called to tell me."

"And?" he said, coming to life again.

"And he wants me to meet him at Chip's. He's scared."

"Good," he replied, pulling himself to his usual rigid posture. All of a sudden, he was the old Rifkin. He was like one of those predatory birds that puff their feathers to make themselves appear more threatening than they really are.

"The son of a bitch ought to be scared," he said, his face falling into his customary scowl. "The long arm of the law is about to catch up with him, and it will hit him harder than anything he could ever have imagined."

I agreed with him and stood, waiting for something more, wondering why he'd been so insistent that I come to his office. I would rather have been with Blanton. I wanted to see what his next move would be. Instead, I was stuck with

Rifkin while the dark sky emptied itself in a heavy deluge with flashes of lightning and thunder.

"My father wanted me to be a rabbi," Rifkin said, his jaw firmly set. "I wouldn't go for it. I can't say he wasn't terribly disappointed by my choice. He was a rational man. If you think about it, however, the study of the torah is the study of law." He looked up at me. "You know the story of Abraham and Jacob don't you?"

I nodded.

"That story has had a significant effect on my life. I have often put myself up against Abraham's example. That is the difference between me and Edward Blanton. He may have raised his knife against his own son, but for all the wrong reasons. Sometimes justice seems without compassion, but we must have laws, and all men are expected to abide by those laws or suffer the consequences. Edward Blanton believes he is above the law. He believes he can make his own rules and, even then, is at liberty to break them when he feels it's warranted."

Outside, the thunder rumbled with less intensity as the front moved east. The sky lightened.

"You don't agree?"

"Oh, I do."

"But, you think I'm a hypocrite."

"Not at all," I replied.

"You are a lousy liar," he said, scowling. "I know Kilmer gave you a copy of the documents."

"I know you do."

"I also know a thing or two about PanBank that even Blanton doesn't know I know. Why do you think our friends from McQuoid & Reed came out of the cold today?"

"You?"

"His little world should be collapsing as we speak."

"And what law does that fall under?"

"The law of `I am going to bring down the other son of a bitch before he brings me down.'"

"It seems terribly cold for a man whose name graces institutions dedicated to enlightenment," I said.

"This is justice," he snapped. "Blanton is an immoral man."

"Perhaps it was a good thing you didn't become a rabbi," I said.

"Watch it, Jacob," he warned. "You know I wonder if you truly understand how corrupt Edward Blanton has become. He is a wicked man, a selfish and uncaring man who has let spite blind his eyes."

"I hate to say so, but so have you."

He glared at me.

"Are you planning to turn against me, too?" he asked.

"I don't need to prove anything. And I have no leverage."

"Damn right," he said.

"So tell me, what should I do considering all you've said – tell Blanton I can't meet him at Chip's?"

"No. Meet him, stay glued to him. Find out what he plans to do. Just be mindful – I hold the upper hand here."

I assured him I was aware of that fact and left him to his own ruminations. By this time, the rain was coming down in a slow, steady shower. I threw on a raincoat and ran down Grant Street to Chip's on 4th Avenue. The place was empty except for a bartender wiping down the taps. He must have known I was looking for Blanton because he scowled and pointed toward the other room.

Blanton was in a booth sprawled across the bench, a cellular phone held to his ear. His other hand veiled his eyes in disbelief and despair. Someone on the other end of the line was shouting.

"No, no-oh," Blanton protested, almost slipping off the bench. "Come on Vinnie, you can't say that. Not now," he howled. On the table was an empty martini glass with a tortured lemon twist laying next to it. A waitress leaned against the wall watching him.

"You with him?" she asked.

"Yeah," I replied.

"You want a martini too?"

"A Coke please," I replied.

"Whatever," she said, shrugging.

I sat down across from Blanton. He didn't acknowledge me.

"But you gotta...Vinnie, listen to me, Vinnie!" Blanton barked into the phone. The voice on the other end of the line was of one whose patience was being tried. Blanton winced at what Vinnie was saying.

"God Damnit!" he yelled, hurling the phone at me. Out of sheer reflex I caught it, and the two of us stared in disbelief at the device where I had picked it out of the air.

"Christ, Jake," Blanton said, visibly shaken. "They're abandoning me like rats off a sinking ship."

"Who?" I asked, placing the phone down on the table.

"Everybody," he replied, taking up the phone again and turning it off.

"My buyers stopped picking up Gorman debt and my allies are turning tail. They want to go with Harrington and his piece of shit unsecured debt. The guy holds a tiny piece of the whole pie, but they're throwing their lots in with him, because they think those fuckers from McQuoid & Reed are going to implicate me. Shit! They have no faith! I filed my disclosure forms this morning at the courthouse anyway and submitted my restructuring plan, but it's already dead in the water."

"Let me get this straight," I said. "The vultures abandoned you for Harrington?"

"Yes!" he replied, exasperated. "And my plan gives them a better return! Can you believe it? These guys are notorious for having no hearts at all, and they're scared of what two guys who skipped the country might say about me? Whatever happened to the profit motive, goddamnit?"

"What do you do now?" I asked.

The waitress appeared with another martini for Blanton, in a rocks glass just in case he started throwing things. I accepted my Coke appreciatively. Blanton sullenly swirled his drink, staring into it.

"I hate to do it," he grumbled. "But I have to go to Harrington." He looked deeply into his glass as though he were plumbing its depths for an answer. "I'm screwed unless he lets me in..." He let out a short, sad laugh. "If he lets me in. Shit."

"Why can't you hold onto your piece and ride Harrington's coat tails?" I asked.

"Because," he replied, sickened by the idea, "I bought too high. I thought I'd walk away with the damn company."

"Do you think Harrington will play ball?"

Blanton slouched low in his chair watching the rain streak the window.

"Who knows..." he said weakly.

All of a sudden his face lit up in a beatific smile that could have warmed the heart of a thousand cripples. There was a gleam in his eye and I shivered to think of what he'd thought of now. He raised his glass in the air. "To the next step," he said, nodding toward my Coke, gesturing for me to join him in a toast.

"To the next step," I agreed, shrugging.

He downed his drink in one enormous gulp, threw a fifty on the table and motioned for me to follow him. He was already out the door by the time I grabbed my coat. I had to trot after him as he made his way down Grant Street straightening his tie. He wasn't wearing a coat or carrying an umbrella. The rain did not appear to touch him. He strode down the sidewalk to One Mellon where he bounded up the escalator to the elevators.

"What's up?" I asked.

"You'll see," he replied. "Just pretend you're working with me."

"What?"

"Pretend you're my associate," he said glibly, rocking back on his heels.

Harrington's firm was tucked away at the end of a corridor and identified only by a piece of paper with the firm's name printed on it, taped to the plain, wooden door. The decor inside wasn't much better. An unremarkable-looking woman sat behind a second hand desk. There was no artwork except for a few computer printouts and a graph Scotch-taped to the wall. Blanton announced himself and the woman pointed to two folding chairs positioned next to a dead plant. It was a long way from the marble and walnut-paneled foyer of Rifkin, Sampson, Kelly & Wells, or whatever it was called by that time.

We sat in silence for a while as several harried looking young men and women rushed by, carrying massive stacks of computer printouts, their hair messed-up, dark circles under their eyes. Harrington appeared and looked down at us, his hands on his hips.

"Ed, Jacob, I wasn't expecting you."

"We have a proposal for you," Blanton announced.

"I'll listen," he said. "Let's go to my office."

He led us through a large open work floor filled with desks littered with printouts and stacks of paper occupied by yet more harried looking young men and women. A few looked up from their work. Blanton nodded to some of them and they gazed at him with the stunned look of seeing someone they thought was dead.

"Hey, Jimmy," Blanton called to one, who looked at us, dumbfounded.

When we turned the corner, we received the biggest shock of all – a tired looking Jeffrey Kilmer. Blanton stopped in his tracks. Kilmer smiled wryly at Blanton and raised his eyebrows at the sight of me. I realized Blanton had intended to use

the photocopied documents Kilmer had given me as a trump card with Harrington. Now with Kilmer in his employ, Harrington had over trumped Blanton.

Blanton vacillated for a moment.

"Hey guy," Kilmer said, almost chuckling.

Harrington's usually somber expression was broken with what may have been a smile.

He ushered us into an office filled with reams of paper. Outside the window, the ornate roof of the Union Trust Building looked like an elaborate wedding cake.

"Seems you've got your people working around the clock on Gorman," Blanton said coolly.

"There's a lot to be evaluated," Harrington replied, evenly. "McAlister's people wreaked havoc on the company. It's taking a lot of effort to sort everything out. But I suppose you're aware of that," he said.

"Sure," Blanton said. "Look, Dan, we've got a proposition for you."

"I'll listen," Harrington stared him straight in the eye.

"I'll put my share of the debt behind you in exchange for a directorship in the new company."

"And?" Harrington insisted.

"I can deliver what few allies I still have to the cause."

"There's a lot of consternation out there about what those fellows from McQuoid & Reed are going to tell the authorities," Harrington commented looking down at a printout. He circled a figure on one of the spread sheets. He



circled the figure again, then looked up. "I can't agree to your offer. My hands are tied," he said solemnly.

"I expected as much," Blanton said. "You know I plan to cooperate with the authorities one hundred percent."

"I appreciate that Edward," Harrington offered. "But unless I can go to my group with something more..."

"What about the possibility of a re-invigorated SEC investigation of the Gorman defense and a lawsuit filed from your former employer over the defense of Gorman-Pittsburgh Industries," Blanton said, tersely.

"You should know better," Harrington replied. There was a look of distaste in his eyes.

"I do," Blanton replied. "But I have to save my ass, Dan."

"You misunderstand me," Harrington said, unsmiling. "I was not admonishing you for threatening to turn Rifkin against me. It's a reasonable suggestion. What I meant was that you should have expected me to be one step ahead of you. As of yesterday, Rifkin & DeCarlo is legal council to my group."

"Very fucking smart," Blanton said, clenching his teeth. His face turned a deep beet red. Rifkin had his revenge. Harrington stared stonily at Blanton, then glanced at me before turning back to his work.

"If you could show yourselves out, it would be helpful," he said, pouring over the computer printout. I looked at Blanton who stared venomously at Harrington bent over his work.

"Come on, Jake, let's get outa here," he said.

Harrington looked up. "It's business, Ed."

Blanton did not reply. He was halfway out of Harrington's office. He walked with his head bowed, rubbing his chin, deep in thought. Kilmer blocked his path, smiling wickedly.

"How far the mighty do fall," he said.

Blanton looked up at him as a man would look at a stranger who'd just propositioned his daughter, and hit him squarely in the jaw with a right uppercut. Kilmer stumbled backwards and fell onto a desk piled high with paper. I grabbed Blanton and hurried him to the reception area as Harrington's employees looked on in shock. I glanced back and made eye contact with Harrington for an instant. The expression on his face could best be described as detached pity.

I found myself struggling to keep pace with Blanton as he hurried down Grant Street in the rain. We passed the Steel building and the Gulf tower where the falcons were probably perched high on a parapet riding out the rain. When we reached the courthouse, Blanton crossed the street in the middle of the block toward the Federal Office Building.

"You know somebody at the FBI, don't you?" he asked. There was a genuinely frightened expression on his face. I couldn't imagine why he thought he could save himself by going to the feds.

I asked for squirrel agent Williams when we reached the FBI. He appeared and smiled broadly as he extended his hand to me. But the smile fell from his face when he saw Blanton.

"Oh my," he said, shaking my hand absently.

"Edward Blanton, this is agent Williams," I said.

"Are you in charge of my case?" Blanton asked.

"Not anymore," he replied. "Agent Petropoulos is."

"Is he in charge of the file?" Blanton asked, losing his patience.

"She is," Williams replied. "Do you want me to see if she's available?"

"Yes, please," Blanton hissed.

Williams disappeared behind the door and Blanton straightened his tie and smoothed his hair with his hand.

"Whadda you think of that Jake," he said with nervous confidence.

"Chicks at the FBI."

Agent Williams reappeared, followed by an attractive young lady in a knit suit who looked Blanton over, frowning as she considered his shoes and the cut of his suit. She nodded and we followed her through the door down the hall to a conference room.

Williams shut the door once we were all inside and Blanton and Petropoulos eyed each other for a moment.

"Ferregamo?" she asked.

"What?" he growled.

"Your tie," she replied. "Is it Ferregamo?"

"Yeah," he replied as though she were crazy.

Williams leaned against a credenza and watched, his arms folded across his chest.

"Okay, here's the deal," Blanton offered. "I'll cooperate fully in the McQuoid & Reed and PanBank investigations in return for immunity."

"Yesterday I would have jumped at the chance," Petropoulos said. "But now it's a whole new ball game."

"And what the fuck does that mean?" Blanton snapped, leaping from his seat. Williams jumped to attention, but Petropoulos stood her ground and stared Blanton down.

"It means I have explicit instructions not to cut any deals." She set her jaw firmly, awaiting his reply.

"So I'm left out in the cold?" Blanton said indignantly, a vein on his forehead bulging. "Just like that?"

"Just like that. No deals."

Petropoulos said she said she had other business to tend to and asked Williams to see us out.

Williams shook both our hands once we reached the reception area and said he was sorry he couldn't do anything more for us.

"Don't sweat it," Blanton said caustically. He stared hard at Williams then turned to me. "Come on, Jake, let's get the hell out of this place." Blanton stormed out the door and I hesitated a moment to reassure Williams he shouldn't take it personally. He said he wouldn't, but I'm sure he did.

Once we were back on Grant Street, Blanton paused for a moment and yawned. Stretching, he looked up at the clouds racing by. The rain had let up. There were breaks in the clouds and patches of blue sky. He stretched out his arms like a preacher entreating the congregation to give themselves to God.

"Fuck `em all," he said. "Fuck that bitch in her pricey suit. What the hell's happened to the FBI? 'No deals,'" he said, imitating agent Petropoulos in a

sarcastic, falsetto voice. "Screw the bitch! Screw Harrington and Rifkin and Kilmer and those bastards from McQuoid & Reed. Fuck them all until they're black fucking corpses rotting in the sun." He turned to me then stared at his reflection in the window of the Federal Building.

"So what if I don't get Gorman," he said calmly. "Jesus, what was I thinking? I don't want to run a corporation. Fourteen hour days, the headaches, the fucking unions – who needs it?"

"What about the investigations?" I asked. "What about the pieces of the Gorman you hold? You're going to take a bath on them."

"So what?" he said, turning on me. "So fucking what? So I'll take less than I could have gotten, I'll still have a shitload of cash in the end. So maybe the feds will fine me. Let `em. I'll still have a fortune stashed away. Look at that goddamn Michael Milken. They fined him, locked him up in club fed, took away that cheesy toupee of his, and he's still worth over a billion dollars. That's billion with a `B' my friend."

"For someone so pleased with himself, you seem pretty pissed off," I said.

"Maybe I like being pissed off!" he roared, pushing me. He threw his hands against my chest and pushed me again. "Maybe I don't need shits like you telling me how to act. Maybe I'm the last great optimist. Maybe I see opportunity everywhere I turn. Everyone else wrings their hands and says `no-oh, we couldn't possibly do anything ambitious as that.' No. That would require courage. That would require people to stick their necks out and take risks. We can't have that now, can we? Can we?"

He pushed me again, and I pushed him back. He stumbled backwards and fell off the curb, onto his ass in the street. He sat there grinning like a madman as cars bore down on him. I offered my hand and he grabbed it, jumping from harm's way at the last possible moment.

"Sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have pushed you."

"Yes, you should have," he said, grinning. "You damn well should have." He brushed himself off and looked me in the eye. "You've helped me out too many damn times, Jake. I appreciate it," he said, offering his hand. I took it and he pulled me to him, clutching me in a bear hug. "You take care of Jenna and don't take any shit from anybody. Okay?"

"What's this?" I asked. "The brush off?"

"Nahh," he said, letting go of me. "Of course not. We'll see each other, I guess. I dunno. I don't know what I'm thinking."

We stood there for a while not saying anything, watching the clouds break up and the sun glint off the wet street. Then he turned and made his way down Grant Street.

There was no telling how much money he had stashed away. But what would he do next? I doubt he would have retired peaceably. Laying back and growing even fatter and grayer seemed unimaginable. Edward Blanton, born in a steel town along the river, could not retire in upper class suburbia while other men still fought and scraped and struggled. It would be unthinkable to him.

Sometime during his youth he must have heard of the tall tale of Joe Magarak, the steelworker who threw himself into a ladle of molten steel so that he could lend his work ethic and steel-hunky soul to the I-beams and girders that

would build the bridges and buildings and locomotives that would build the nation. Sometime during his soot-filled youth, someone must have told him that he could grow up to be president of the United States. And he must have looked around him, at the mill in the valley, and the freight trains stretching as far as the eye could see, loaded with steel and coke and ore, and had said, "Yes, maybe I can. Yes." And it had seemed possible. He'd bought into it because he saw a world still spreading its arms out, reaching for possibilities, and it all seemed real and plausible, full of wonder.

I didn't feel like going back to the office, so I headed toward Jenna's gallery to see if she would come out and play hooky with me. With the place closing in a few days, I figured there wouldn't be much for her to do. As I walked, I couldn't get the image of Blanton sauntering down Grant Street out of my mind. It was the feeling you have when you part with someone and promise to keep in touch, though you know you never really will. It is a sad and hollow sensation, a tightening in the chest.

When I arrived at Jenna's gallery, she was standing in the front window looking at the sky. I watched her watch basking the newborn sun like cat until she noticed me. I motioned for her to come out and she turned to ask her boss. Turning again, she smiled and dashed off to retrieve her things.

We kissed as she jumped to the sidewalk, but she stepped back and looked into my eyes.

"You're sad," she said.

"Yeah."

"Why."

"I don't know," I replied, unable to put my feelings into words.

Holding hands, we headed toward the Allegheny and stood above the 10th Street Bypass watching the sun shimmer on the river. Cars raced below us. Above, a gull soared on the breeze. The cool air and the sunshine and the leaves in their full autumn regalia on the hillsides deepened my melancholy. Blanton and Rifkin, Harrington, and Kilmer were far, far away. Behind us, the city seemed hollow, a collection of buildings gleaming in the autumn light, the culmination of architects' best intentions and businessmen's mistaken dreams of immortality.

We took the bus home, unaccustomed to the unfamiliar faces of those who ride the bus while we are usually at work. Old women wearing babushkas, students, welfare mothers, retirees, all looked at us as we leaned against each other and held hands without words.

As the bus crawled up the ramp to North Neville, I glanced out the window, and saw that the mannequin had been smashed to pieces. Hands, arms and legs were strewn about the ground. The severed head stared horrifically at the sky. A bent arm was caught in a tree branch and a foot floated in one of the refrigerator compartments that had filled with rainwater. Jenna pressed my hand.

"My god," I whispered. An old man sitting across the aisle looked at us, bewildered.

"You look like you've seen the devil himself," he said, good-naturedly.

"I may have," I replied

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We spent the rest of the day sitting on the patio, drinking martinis watching the squirrels gather food for the winter, the birds skirting by nervously, chattering. We sat, waiting for the news we somehow knew was coming.

The sun was low in the sky and the temperature had dropped twenty degrees by the time the phone rang. We'd quit the patio and had retreated to the bedroom, huddled under a comforter. I was sleepy and warm and didn't want to answer, so I let it ring several times before picking it up. Blanton's nanny was on the other end of the line.

"De police called and said Mr. Blanton is dead and I'm here alone Mr. Jake, and I found `dis number in his book and I don't know what to do," she blurted in her lilting voice.

"Bertha, where is Mrs. Blanton?" I asked. "Does she know?"

"She's at her tennis club and the children are all playing at football and de police said Mr. Blanton went to some lady Sheila someone's house after he crashed his car into a tree and bled to death in this Sheila's living room." She rambled on, her frightened voice a staccato sing-song of horrifying facts.

"Did you tell the police where Mrs. Blanton was?" I asked.

"Yes. They said they would go there and tell her."

"Okay," I said, as if I had the right to tell others what to do in the face of death. "Stay there and wait for the children to come home. Have a drink ready for Mrs. Blanton." I didn't know how I was coming up with all of this advice, but it seemed to make sense.

Still in bed, I looked through the white pages for Shelly Downey's number and called her. The phone rang a long time and I was about to hang up when she answered. She sounded terrible, drunk.

"Who the hell you say you were?" she demanded after I introduced myself.

"Jake Gold. I saw you perform early this summer at the Balcony with Ed Blanton," I said.

"You're Eddie's friend?" she asked, suspiciously.

"Yes. I was with him this morning."

"Did you say your name was Jake?" she asked, sobering up for a moment.

"Yes," I replied.

"What do you want?" she slurred.

"Um," I hesitated. "What happened..."

"What happened he asks! I'll tell you what happened. I'll tell you what fucking happened! He smashed his goddamn skull to pieces, then crawled a quarter mile bleeding like a frigging pig so he could tell me he should have married me and never got mixed up with all those pinstriped sons-of-bitches and their starch-assed wives. He bled to death in my living room and the fricking coroner put him in a body bag and carted him off. That's what happened God damnit! There's blood all over my brand new carpet. The man bled to death on my brand new goddamned carpet."

The phone dropped to the floor and I could hear her sobbing in the background. I called her name a few times before she retrieved the phone. She sniffed a few times and apologized for yelling.

"Eddie said he trusted you. He made me promise to make you vow you wouldn't become a Rifkin, whatever that means. Do you know what that means?"

"I do," I replied. "I know exactly what it meant." I asked her if she needed anything and she said it was nice of me to ask, but she wanted to be alone.

"Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah, kid, don't sweat it," she said, untouched by my concern. I hung up and curled up next to Jenna and held her in the fading sunlight. I told her what had happened as she held my hands to her breast, not facing me. We said nothing, just lay there listening to the rhythm of our own breathing.

"Who was the woman?" Jenna asked finally asked.

"An old friend of Blanton's," I replied. "A sad woman who lost control of her life."

Jenna nodded slowly, only half-understanding.

"Why'd he go to her place?"

"I think he felt he'd let his life get away from him," I said, struggling to find the right words. "She was his connection to a simpler past, I guess. I don't know."

I looked at Jenna, sadly I suppose, because she pulled me to her and kissed my eyes. "You never did meet him, did you?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I'm glad I didn't."

She shivered and I pulled her to me, feeling guilty for ever thinking she might have been a set-up for Rifkin, Blanton or whomever.

In the growing darkness, I thought about the death promise Blanton had exacted: not to become a Rifkin. For Blanton that was what it was all about I

suppose – "us" versus "them," a rebellion against the Rifkins of the world. Maybe he saw himself as some kind of quasi-moral Don Quixote, futilely battling windmills. In the silent darkness of the room, I lay awake thinking of Blanton's fight against everyone he deemed an enemy and how his life was consumed by that battle.

In the end what did it mean? What would Blanton's kids say their daddy did? Did his kids even like him? Did they understand why their mother was so unhappy?

I fell asleep dreaming of birds soaring above the steel and glass spires of the city while businessmen, secretaries, paralegals, actuaries and accountants, dreamers, bureaucrats, young kids full of promise and old men beaten down by life, men and women who worried how they were going to pay their bills, or how they would break off affairs with their lovers, or how they were going to stave off despair for one more day, all scurried about below, rushing blindly toward nothing much at all.

## CH 9

The day of Blanton's funeral, a small blurb on page 4 of the Wall Street Journal reported that a group of Gorman-Pittsburgh Industries creditors led by Daniel Harrington, had filed a bankruptcy reorganization plan for the company in the U.S. Federal District Court. The last line of the three sentence notice reported that the group expected the company to emerge from bankruptcy in as little as four months. On the same day, there was a small article in the Post-Gazette noting that the law firm of Rifkin, Sampson, Kelly & Wells had formally changed its name to Rifkin & DeCarlo, P.C.

Blanton's obituary had appeared the day after his death, with a photo lifted from an old firm brochure of a regal-looking Blanton in three-quarter profile. The Post-Gazette reported that he had crawled from the wreckage of his car and died 'in a nearby house.' Publicly, that was all that was said. Privately, tongues were wagging all around town. Hundreds of lawyers shook their heads in disdain as they discussed Blanton's overreaching ambition. Leave those sorts of shenanigans to the sharks in New York. Pittsburgh, they agreed, was one of the last remaining bastions of reasonableness, a town where the value of hard work was still respected and rewarded. If those damned Wall Street analysts didn't like the way we sober Pittsburghers conducted business, to hell with them. You could almost hear the rustle of hundreds of starched collars as they collectively shook their heads.

When the vultures descended upon Gorman to "save" it, there were more than a handful of New Yorkers among them, but they were given rave reviews in

the press anyway for preserving jobs in Pittsburgh's steel industry. It didn't matter that the new Gorman would consist of a few specialty mills, of which at most, only one would be located in the area. The others would probably be located down south or overseas. At best, it would mean possibly one hundred jobs to a Pittsburgh economy still reeling from the death of big steel, and the tens of thousands of jobs that were lost with it.

Gorman's creditors eventually walked away from the restructuring with reasonable settlements. The vulture-investors made a pretty penny on their investments or received stock in the new company. A new board of directors who knew which hand was feeding them was installed. The old Gorman pension fund was raided and the retirees found themselves on the short end of the stick. But news of the plight of the pension fund was lost in the drone of praise the new company received in the papers and business weeklies.

Harrington was named chairman of the board and CEO. A hard-nosed former plant manager from big steel who didn't take shit from anyone was brought in as president. They promised to keep the operation lean and mean, and if there ever was a poster boy for austerity, it was Harrington. But it was more than lip service. Pittsburghers had long memories and short patience for executives who surrounded themselves with the spoils of their success. One notorious former corporate executive of a Pittsburgh industrial giant had earned the wrath of the city by ensconcing himself and his fellow officers in lavish executive suites filled with impressionist paintings and priceless antiques while they ran the company into the ground. Harrington headquartered the new company in the same offices from which he'd engineered the takeover. I'm told

that when the Federal judge approved the Gorman reorganization, Harrington and his employees popped a few bottles of champagne and ordered out for pizza.

That was all the celebration there was. A few hours later, he negotiated a lease to rent space on the floor below to accommodate the additional personnel he'd have to take on. He took the space as is, with no renovations or change of floor plan. He rented used office furniture, hired fifty new employees in one week and set them to work. Kilmer later told me he was the only junior manager without an MBA. He laughed describing the look on the Wharton and Harvard grads' faces when they saw the second-hand desks that would serve as their offices.

Harrington came out of the battle little scarred and about fifty million dollars richer, just for starters. Rifkin hadn't been so lucky. Like John Henry collapsing at the end of his epic struggle, Rifkin suffered a massive stroke a few days before Blanton's funeral.

That week I was summoned to a meeting by Ralph Sampson, who had maintained his social ties with Rifkin, despite the fact he had been forced into retirement and had his name removed from the firm's front door. The luncheon took place in a private dining room at the Duquesne Club. He and I arrived early and he spoke of Rifkin, of the irony that the most healthy of the old partners had been the first to succumb.

"Very sad, sad indeed," he said, his body shaken with palsy. He called my attention to the menu card with a shaking hand, remarking on the vichyssoise. "A specialty of the club," he intoned.

"It was one of my grandfather's favorites," I told him gently.

"Oh, of course," he responded. "Of course. He was a member, that's right."

Again it was silent and we both glanced nervously about the wood-paneled room, at the passable still-lives and landscapes framed in ornate gilt frames. Fresh flowers were arranged in several vases about the room.

"So," he said, clearing his throat.

I looked expectantly at him.

"I knew your grandfather."

"Oh?" I said.

"Not terribly well..."

Silence.

"Do you know he once sold the answers to a test to Theo Rifkin?"

"So I've heard."

"He was a mean son of a gun. A good man, but tough."

I nodded.

"Tough..."

The silence was excruciating. We stood there like embarrassed kids on a first date, frozen with nothing to say. Finally the other participants of the meeting filed in. Among them was William DeCarlo, the new nameplate partner. Throughout the meeting he said little and deferred to Mrs. Rifkin.

A variety of issues were agreed upon before the meal was served. First of all, I was told the firm would no longer be in need of my services. I would continue to receive my salary for six months, and was asked not to make public my knowledge of the happenings in the firm during my tenure there as long as



Theodore Rifkin was alive. I was asked to sign an affidavit agreeing to this restriction. No alternatives were offered.

Mrs. Rifkin had taken time off from sitting at her husband's side at the hospital to attend the meeting. She was an elegant, gray woman who carried herself regally. She seemed to be impatient, eager to dispense with the formalities and get done with it. She sat rigidly, her posture perfect, determined. Watching her, I wondered who was tougher, she or her husband. I'm sure she could be charming when called for. She reminded me of a WASP incarnation of my grandmother, tough. I suppose she had to be.

Each time she looked at me, it was as though she were looking at a wet mongrel cowering in the street. She did not smile, or try to temper her disdain for me. I guess she thought I was just another punk wanna-be.

After I signed the agreement, Sampson started in on a little speech. Mrs. Rifkin rolled her eyes skyward. "Let's get it over with," she muttered. I wish I could say I was relieved when lunch was served, but I wasn't.

The conversation degenerated into uncomfortable small talk as the soup was served. Sampson turned to me, in mid-sip and asked what I intended to do with myself.

"Well...I'm not sure," I replied hesitantly. All present held their soup spoons in mid-air, waiting for my response.

"I heard Dan Harrington is hiring on many people," he said.

"I suppose he has to," I replied.

"I've heard you've already accepted a position with him," he said, carefully guiding his spoon to this mouth.

"I haven't."

"I'm surprised Blanton didn't put a good word in for you," he said, passing a napkin over his mouth.

"I don't think they were on particularly close terms before Blanton passed away."

"I suppose not," Mrs. Rifkin conceded unenthusiastically.

"I think I'll steer clear of anything having to do with Gorman Industries," I replied.

"Good," Mrs. Rifkin muttered.

The room fell silent and remained so until the Virginia Spots were served. I've never been terribly fond of the little fish although they too are considered a specialty of the club. I picked at my salad, but I didn't much feel like eating.

When DeCarlo declared that they had further business to tend to after lunch I excused myself before coffee was served, happy to get the hell out of dodge.

I took my time leaving the club. I wandered through the corridor, looking at paintings – pastoral landscapes, portraits of dead millionaires, past club presidents, and a few dark canvases of Pittsburgh's industrial past. There was a Remington bronze and a few painters of the Scalp Level School. There was a portrait of Andrew Carnegie looking as regal as a poor Scotsman turned robber baron could. On the grand stairway I ran into the manager of the club. He tried his best to recall my first name.

"I see you and I'm reminded of your grandfather," he said, shaking my hand. "The resemblance is remarkable. He was a good man." He looked me in the eye with an expression of knowing more than he would ever let on. Like a butler in a great manor, he was privy to a great deal of information about the people he'd served for so many years. His quick eyes told of whispers overheard and rumors suppressed.

"All in all," he said, "they're good people who come here. I've seen my share of them, and basically, they've got their hearts in the right place."

"I don't know, Angelo."

"Let me tell you a story," he offered, grasping his hands behind his back. "We get a lot of weddings here. This one, the father he puts out some spread, let me tell you. The champagne's flowing, they've got a twenty-piece orchestra, caviar, filet mignon, enough roses to break a bumblebee's heart – the whole nine yards. The bride is a looker, the groom, he's just finishing medical school." He stopped and looked at me with a queer smile. He motioned for me to walk with him, and we made our way down the stairway to the ground floor. In the fountain court, waiters busily set tables and swept the floor.

"You know what?" he said as he watched them. "The father of the bride was a drunk, a big businessman, but a lush. He'd stagger in here with a girl on his arm reeking of whiskey, swearing like a sailor. I had a kid on call every night just in case this big shot drunk came in. We'd put him in the service elevator and get him into one of the rooms, get rid of the girl if we could. The guy was a louse," he said shaking his head. "But at his daughter's wedding, he was the picture of the proud father. Stone cold sober, a loving, smiling husband and father of the

bride. His intentions were good, even though he was a louse. The key is to try to live your life the way that guy lived it on his daughter's wedding day."

He motioned me to follow him again, and we stopped in the cool green light of the billiards room.

"What happened to him, do you know?" I asked.

"Dead. Shot himself in the head," he replied. "So maybe it's tougher walking the straight and narrow, but it don't often kill you." He smiled and put his hand on my arm, and again assumed the air of a man in charge. "You take care of yourself," he said, ushering me past the sitting room to the lobby.

"You, too," I said with a smile. The doorman tipped his hat as I passed and I walked out onto 6th Street. I looked back and the manager winked, smiling for a moment before turning to the doorman for a quick inspection. I knew I'd set step foot in that place again.

The day they buried Blanton it was bright and cold, cold enough to see the funeral-goers' breath as they stood about the entrance of Calvary Episcopal Church. The church was just down the street from my apartment. That Blanton had even belonged to a church was surprising. He never struck me as even remotely religious. And the fact the church was a twenty minute drive from his house made it seem even more curious. But I suppose it wasn't surprising that he belonged to "the congregation to belong to" for Pittsburgh's Episcopalians. The congregants are particularly well-heeled and the church itself is rather grand. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Sacred Heart Catholic Church is right across

the street, and what better way to thumb your nose at the Papacy than to have really good digs?

Despite the understated opulence of the church itself, the congregants were Episcopalians after all, and the fact that Blanton was a member must have been just another way he'd gone out of his way to piss off the establishment. Had he lived longer, I suppose he would have rooted himself even deeper under their collective skin by donating a classroom or even an entire wing. I wondered if Blanton was a good parishioner. I couldn't imagine him as a regular Sunday churchgoer, however hard I tried.

The turnout for the funeral was surprisingly good. I recognized several partners of the city's most prestigious law firms in attendance, perhaps out of sheer curiosity. I couldn't imagine any other reason for their being there. The thought did cross my mind that from afar, they had watched Blanton's maneuverings, admiring his ballsiness. But would that have been enough to draw them to his funeral? These were no well dressed sharpies after all, they were the pillars of the community. Whatever the reason, they seemed to know who I was. Jenna and I raised a bit of a buzz as we made our way through the crowd. Inside, quite a few people were already seated in the pews. The family was arranged in the front row. Mrs. Blanton stared straight ahead, wearing sunglasses. The children were dressed in black, and sat in descending order of age with the littlest seated beside Bertha, who cooed in her ear and smoothed her hair.

I hesitated a moment before giving my condolences. Mrs. Blanton sat with a stone-like expression, ignoring me.

"Missus," Bertha said to her quietly. "It's Mr. Jake. Mister Blanton's young friend. You know..."

"Yes," Mrs. Blanton said, distractedly, turning to take my hand. "Yes, Edward spoke of you," she said, a vacant smile lingering on her lips. Because of the glasses, I couldn't tell if she was grieving or if she was just wishing to get the whole thing over with.

"I'm sorry," I said, trying to think of something to say. "I tried all I could..."

"Yes," she replied, taking off her glasses, as though she thought I'd done enough. She forced a smile and started to say something but stopped, thinking better of it. "Edward was one of a kind," she said after a pause. She took off her glasses. She had been crying. "It's not your fault. It's no one's fault," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"So am I," she replied, looking away

She let go of my hand then turned to her oldest, Alex, and kissed him on the head.

By the start of the service it was almost a full house. Most in attendance were no better than the crowd of curious onlookers that gathers at the scene of a car wreck. I gazed at the assortment of rubberneckers and morbid gawkers and noticed Harrington in the very last pew sitting very erect and looking quite mournful, or I should say, looking as mournful as he could. Rifkin's wife was also in attendance.

During the service, the pastor remarked on Blanton's love for his children and of his generosity to the church. I wondered if there might not be a Blanton

wing to Cavalry Episcopal yet. The eulogy was not terribly distinguished, but at least it wasn't one of those "I didn't know the deceased..." sort of graveside orations you sometimes get. No one else stood to speak for him.

Looking around, I realized no one in attendance could truly have been called a friend of Blanton. Only Harrington had worked closely with him, and you couldn't expect him to step forward to say words in Blanton's memory, considering everything. There were a few people whom I did not recognize, neighbors I suppose, women who knew him from cocktail parties or the country club, men who knew him as a little league father perhaps. Their only knowledge of his professional escapades had come from what they'd read in the newspapers.

At the conclusion of the service, Mrs. Blanton accepted the funeral-goers' condolences. Mrs. Rifkin was one of the first to offer her sympathy. The two women conversed for a minute or so.

Harrington made an awkward attempt to join the line of mourners but Mrs. Blanton shot him a look that froze him. He shrunk from the line and retreated to the shadows of the nave, almost all the way to the vestibule.

The procession that followed the hearse to the cemetery consisted of a half dozen vehicles. As the funeral director distributed flags for the mourners' cars, I noticed Sheila Downey sitting in a beat-up Oldsmobile, waiting to join the cortege. I hadn't seen her in the church.

The short parade of cars snaked through Shadyside and Oakland, then inched its way along the parkway, past the spires of downtown glinting in the autumn sunshine. We crossed bridges spanning rivers and hollows, and traveled

along leaf-covered lanes that hugged hillsides lined with oaks and maples ablaze in color. Just when it appeared we would round yet another hillside, the procession passed through a gate that seemed to lead nowhere. As the procession topped the hill we found ourselves looking down a steep incline with a commanding view of the Ohio River and an idled, sprawling steel mill. I'd become so disoriented during the drive, I couldn't tell which mill it was. Below, a small town cascaded down the hillside, spilling up to the gates of the empty plant. Smokestacks reached to the sky, black and idle, no longer spilling choking fumes into the air.

The river flowed past the mill before disappearing around a bend. Blanton had been born in a steel town just like it. His father and his father's father had worked in the mills. Theirs hadn't been an easy life, but they'd been able to afford a new car every few years or so, made of the same steel they themselves poured and milled. In summer they vacationed at Wildwood, New Jersey or Ocean City, Maryland, or they might have had a small hunting cabin in the mountains. They worked in mills hemmed in by the river on one side and by railroad tracks on the other, and lived in houses on the flats or clinging to the hillsides. They were buried in cemeteries on the hilltops overlooking the valleys, the steel towns and the rivers, closer to God.

We made our way along a road that coiled itself down the hill in hairpin turns. The hearse stopped on one of these where a carpet had been laid in a path traversing the hillside, leading to a grave hollowed beside a large monument topped with a herald angel.



Once they maneuvered the coffin to the grave, we gathered in a small group for the brief ceremony. Blanton was laid to rest next to his parents whose grave was marked by the massive angel-topped monument, which Blanton must have purchased after they were originally interred. Looking around, I noticed Harrington standing off to one side, Sheila Downey his unlikely companion. They stood, heads bowed, straining to hear the priest's words. It took me a minute to realize the tree they were standing beneath was, in fact, sculpted of stone, with names of the dead inscribed in its branches.

Once the coffin was lowered into the grave and the children each dropped a spadeful of dirt on the casket, Mrs. Blanton made her way over to where Sheila and Harrington stood by the stone tree. Harrington looked uneasy. She walked right past him and took Sheila's hand, offering a few words to her. Sheila nodded in response and the two slowly made their way back to the road holding hands, Harrington walking below them on the hillside as though spotting them in case one of them fell. Bertha glared at him coldly as the threesome approached the children and he retreated a few paces.

The small group of mourners dispersed and headed for their cars as a red tail hawk circled overhead, calling on the wind. Sheila Downey walked past Jenna and me.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She wiped her eyes with a tissue.

"She's a good lady," she said, without stopping.

Harrington approached and asked me to call and set up a meeting later in the week. I said I would and he nodded vaguely, already thinking of something else.

A group of workmen were raking leaves below us, and the green grass, cleared of leaves was an unnatural-glowing deep green. The whole scene, the ornate grave markers, the radiant grass and the autumn colors burning on the hillsides seemed unreal, artificial, deepening the unreal sense of closure funerals always take on. Jenna and I leaned against my car, staring over the scene below. Agents Petropoulos and Williams stepped from a black sedan that had been idling at the end of the row of cars. As she approached, Petropoulos, dressed in black, removed her sunglasses. Williams kept his on.

"I'm sorry to disturb you now..." she started.

"Then don't," I replied.

She pursed her lips.

"We have a few questions," she said.

Williams stood immobile.

"Ask away."

"Did Blanton ever tell you about his scheme to take over Gorman?"

"Yes," I replied.

"And did he mention how he planned to finance it?"

"No."

"No?"

"Nope."

She stared at me and sighed.

"Am I under investigation?"

"Not officially," she replied.

"And unofficially?" I asked.

"What was your relationship with Blanton?" she continued.

I paused.

"I was under Rifkin's order to stay close to him," I replied. "You still haven't answered my question."

"Look, Mr. Gold," Williams interjected. "We're just doing our job."

"So was I."

Petropoulos nodded at Blanton's grave.

"Maybe you did your job too well."

I was silent.

Jenna put her hand on my arm. Petropoulos eyed her up and down and Jenna glared at her. Williams tensed.

"So you were just doing your job," Petropoulos repeated.

"Yes."

"And who do you think the true victim in all of this is?" she asked.

"I don't care," I replied.

"You don't care?"

"Not a whit."

"You didn't profit from any of this, did you?"

"I lost."

"Your job?"

"A friend."

"Please..."

"Fuck you."

She crossed her arms across her chest and stared me in the eye. I glared back and said nothing.

"We may need you to answer some more questions later," Williams informed me. "We'll be in touch."

Petropoulos turned on her heels and marched back to the car.

"I'm sorry," Williams whispered, pausing a moment, trying to look apologetic. He awkwardly bowed to Jenna before turning to catch up with Petropoulos.

"You knew everything didn't you," Jenna said as we stared out over the valley.

I nodded.

"I don't want to know," she said.

We stood there and watched dark clouds sail up the valley in a mournful armada. The workmen raking leaves below looked up at the sky and took cover in their truck as a light rain began to fall.

A few days later I took the bus into town for the first time in what seemed like a year, though it had only been a week. Jenna and I had spent most of the time after the funeral alone together. The autumn had turned cool and damp, appropriate for my mood. Finally, I decided it was time to meet Harrington about whatever it was he'd wanted to speak to me about the day of the funeral.

On the bus, I noticed that not only the mannequin, but the entire refrigerator was gone from the hillside. Once in town, I took my time getting to Harrington's office. I walked by the Gulf Tower and watched the sky for Boris and Natasha. People stared as I craned my neck skyward looking for the birds. From behind the Koppers Building, one of them dove toward the street, a blur against the facade of the building. The other bird followed, and together they disappeared behind the Gulf Tower.

On my way up Grant Street I ran into Lacey Jordan. She was dressed in a dark green suit with a short skirt with a low cut blazer and no blouse. It was a very nice suit, of higher quality than those she'd worn while at Rifkin, Sampson. She smiled knowingly.

"On your way to Harrington's?"

I nodded. "How'd you know?"

"I had a feeling," she shrugged. "Nice suit."

"Same to you," I replied. "How's Goldfarb?"

"In the back of the field and fading fast, smart aleck," she said, flipping her hair over her shoulder. It had grown longer and somehow more voluminous. She'd found a better hairdresser. "He went back to wifey. Anyway, I'm in securities now."

"A real job?"

"Yes, Jakie-boy. I get to use my brain every once in a while."

"Of course the outfit doesn't hurt."

"Use your assets, that's what I say."

"So what do I do?"

She grinned for a moment, then grimaced as if it was too much to keep up appearances.

"Look," she said, sighing. "Harrington's not as dangerous as they come. He's mean, but he isn't vengeful. He respects loyalty."

"I don't know if I can be loyal to that," I replied.

"Don't be a schmuck," she snapped. "It'd be nice if everything were black and white, but it isn't. Until you learn that, you'll just get let down every time. Go with the flow. Spread your legs once in a while if you have to."

"Nice imagery."

"You know what I'm talking about. You like nice things. You want to give nice things to your girlfriend. What's wrong with that? So he takes credit for your hard work. In the end what's it matter? Who cares? You live, you die, in between you might as well have some kicks."

"I guess I look at things differently."

She shook her head.

"Nice guys finish last," she said, looking at her watch. "Look, I'm late for someone. Don't take things so personally. Bye Jake." She turned on her heels headed across the street, then shouted something, grabbing her crotch. A bus rumbled past, spewing black exhaust. By the time it passed, she was gone.

I was still trying to figure what Lacey could have called to me as I exited the elevator on Harrington's floor. Nothing had been done to spruce up the reception area since Blanton and I had visited. Two slightly worn, uncomfortable looking naugahyde chairs were nestled against the wall where the folding chairs

had been. The receptionist was the same sour woman who had been there before. I announced myself and waited.

I was surprised when Harrington appeared to retrieve me. After all, how often is it that the CEO of a multi-million dollar corporation comes out to greet you personally? He looked even thinner than before, but other than that, executive life didn't appear to have changed him much. He still had the flat-top and clunky wing-tips, the sort with thick soles that look like radial tires.

The office floor looked the same as before, the only difference being even more harried-looking employees rushing around, while others worked furiously at desks piled high with computer printouts. Many of them were the same age as me and looked as though they'd hardly slept in weeks. Both men and women worked in shirt sleeves. Phones rang endlessly, muffled under piles of paper.

"My wife was in the other day," Harrington said, pleased with himself. "She was horrified that there were no walls. Managers work alongside specialists and support staff. No walls, Japanese style."

"How are the guys from old steel taking it?" I asked. "I can't imagine they like it much."

"Those who can adapt, persevere," he replied.

"I've read those Asian management styles don't often work in U.S. corporations." I said as we entered his office.

"Adaptation is the key," he cautioned. "We still have executive offices, though they're not fancy, as you can see." He spread his arm out like a cardboard game show model displaying a new washer and dryer.

His office was spartan except for the commanding view of the granite and steel edifices of Grant Street.

He hesitated before speaking, pretending to glance over a memo that had been left on his chair.

"I wanted to see you to make you an offer," he said, still looking down. "Hear me out before you say anything."

I nodded.

"You have a pretty good head on your shoulders," he started. "You're quick, observant. I was thinking labor relations, perhaps. We're going to have some very tough contract negotiations coming up with the steelworkers. I also need someone at my side..."

"Similar to what Blanton was to you at the firm?" I asked.

He steeled his jaw and nodded once, raising his eyes to look at me.

"Fair enough," he replied. "But Edward and I had a productive partnership. We made a good unit." He stopped and looked past me. Resting his elbows on his desk, he pressed his index fingers to his lips as though in prayer.

"Edward wore his anger on his sleeve" he said carefully. He acted as though he'd been denied something by the world and his only duty was to wrestle it away. I worked closely with him for more than ten years, and I met his wife only a handful of times. I never met his children." He dropped his hands to his desk. "My god, man, he never even mentioned his children to me.

"At one time he and I shared a secretary who was diagnosed with breast cancer. He never expressed concern for her, never visited her in the hospital when she had an operation. He sent flowers then never mentioned her again. She died



a year-and-a-half later, leaving behind two children. Edward didn't even attend the funeral. Now what kind of man is that?" he asked angrily. "What kind of man is that?" he repeated, horrified.

"He was so singularly focused on himself," he continued, "and he deployed his assets in a blind rage and it cost him everything. He lost. I can be single minded in pursuit of what I want, but I am always in control. I never make it personal and in the end I am the first to reach across the table to shake my opponent's hand." He stared blankly at his open palms. Jeffrey Kilmer rushed through the door with a stack of papers and froze at the sight of the motionless Harrington.

"Yes Jeffrey?" he said, annoyed and without looking up.

"Kilmer," I nodded.

"Hey, Jake," he replied, aloof. "The papers came in from Birmingham," he said, handing Harrington the documents. Harrington glanced through them and placed them aside.

"That will be all, Jeffrey," he said.

Kilmer quietly backed out of the office, closing the door behind him. Harrington was quiet for a minute or so more before he looked up and spoke.

"During our lunch meeting at the Rivers Club," he said, "I told you the story of my father's job sweeping out the ovens at the bakery when he was a young man."

I nodded.

He looked at me as if he was about to admit to cheating on his wife. "You are aware, I assume, that your grandfather was respected by his peers."

"Oh god, you're going to bring up my grandfather too?"

"Hear me out," Harrington offered. "He had a reputation for winning at all costs. And he also took things very personally. When I was a young associate, he once challenged another attorney I was working with to a duel. Your grandfather was brilliant, yet so hotheaded he actually challenged a colleague to a duel because he felt the man had insulted him during the course of a trial! We were shocked.

"However, your grandfather was successful because he was able to keep that anger in check most of the time. Blanton could not, and he is dead. If you can keep your idealism in check, you can be as successful as your grandfather. If not..." he waved his hands in the air in a little shrug.

"If not, I could turn out like my father. No fire in the belly. No guts, no glory. Right?"

"Look Jacob, all of this – Gorman, McAlister, Rifkin – all of it is simply business."

"And Blanton's death?"

"Edward was responsible for his own actions."

"End of story?"

"It is unfortunate, but we cannot change what has happened. What is important now is getting Gorman back on its feet."

"I can't accept that," I replied tersely. "And I'm afraid I can't accept your offer." I rose to go and he caught my eyes with his gaze.

"Jake," he insisted, "don't confuse business with something else. You would be passing on a great opportunity."

"That's something I'll have to live with. I don't think I'm cut out to live that kind of life."

He shrugged his shoulders

"If you change your mind, give me a call," he said, offering his hand. I said I would, and shook his hand.

On my way out, Kilmer stopped me and asked if I'd accepted Harrington's offer.

"You said no? Aw come on, Jake, I thought you were a player. Just think of the fun we could have together." He sighed. "Either you're a player or you're not, I guess. I thought you were a player."

"I guess I'm not," I replied.

I left Harrington's offices and headed toward my bus stop. As I made my way down Grant Street, past skyscrapers full of men and women busy pushing paper for banks and widget makers, drawing plans for industrial plants and devising new ways to sell cold medicines, I thought for a moment I might be missing out on some great adventure. But I knew I couldn't have negotiated wage concessions and layoffs in union contract talks without thinking of the empty mills that haunted the valleys, and of the stone monument in the graveyard on the hill marking the grave of Blanton's parents topped by the angel blowing its silent trumpet over the hushed valley.

Above me the falcons soared, looking for pigeons. I'm told that pigeons are not easy quarry. Apparently they're rather skilled fliers. We should all be so fortunate.

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I sometimes think Pittsburgh is a backwards city where peregrine falcons race through canyons of glass and steel and deer graze on wild flowers bathed in silver moonlight on Prescott Street. Now that the once smoke-filled skies had cleared, and the steel mills were gone, perhaps the city couldn't make up its mind what it wanted to be. I couldn't either, and maybe that was why I had to leave. Pittsburgh was all I had ever known. I would always be Abe Gold's grandkid, and that was the problem. Maybe when I could feel I was Jake Gold, period, I'd be able to return.

The hardest part, though, was that as much as I knew I had to leave the city, deep down I also knew Jenna didn't belong anywhere else. The city was a part of her in a way that it could never be a part of me. I don't know how to describe it. I always felt like an outsider, the fortunate kid with white, uncalled hands and a closet full of prep school ties, a lie surrounded by the ghosts of steelworkers and factories, gritty neighborhoods with steep, cobblestone streets, corner saloons and onion domed churches. Until I could shake that feeling, I couldn't go back. I ached for Jenna as soon as I left. It was the hardest thing I had ever done. But maybe, in the long run, that was what I needed most.

I left that winter. The day before my departure I drove by Blanton's house. There was a for-sale sign in the yard along the road. Apparently Mrs. Blanton had decided to move to Florida, and year round outdoor tennis. It had snowed the night before and the expansive lawn and the snow-covered evergreens hugging the house made the scene look like a Hallmark moment Christmas card.

Returning home, I passed the 40th street bridge spanning the Allegheny just upstream from where a young George Washington had crossed the frozen

river and almost drowned when the ice gave way. The young colonel had recognized the tactical importance of the spit of land downriver where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers meet to form the Ohio. Downtown Pittsburgh now rises above that triangle of land, its spires populated by lawyers and businessmen, entrepreneurs, ad men and liars.

Those towers had called to Edward Blanton like an emerald city beckoning him to prosper and claim that which had been unjustly denied him, his father and his father's father before him – riches, power, justice. But in the end, the beckoning was a lie, siren songs sung by enchantresses bereft of souls. Blanton's was the American dream gone terribly awry, but he died, I believe, realizing full well that he'd fallen for it, lock stock and barrel.

Perhaps he'd known it as early as when McAlister died, pathetically, in his own bathtub. Perhaps he had proceeded with his schemes with the knowledge he would fail in the end. Perhaps he had realized that like the rusted mills along the rivers, that he, too, was obsolete. The polluted skies of the city had cleared, and the demand now was for men and women who chased after money and worthless paper rather than for mill-hunks who forged coke and limestone and iron ore into steel. Soon everyone would be flipping burgers and asking if we'd like fries to go with our orders. Perhaps Blanton foresaw that future and couldn't stomach what he saw.

Driving along the north shore of the Allegheny, the city's towers came into view in the crisp winter dusk. The skyline was lit against the fading light of the evening sky. The beacon on top of the Grant Building spelled

P-I-T-T-S-B-U-R-G-H in Morse Code, and the weather beacon atop the Gulf Building shone a steady blue, foretelling clear weather ahead.

To the east, over the laurel and chestnut ridges of the Alleghenies, the sky was already filled with stars, shining high above the passes through which the settlers of this nation had traveled, following Indian trails that led to this city and the rivers. To the west lay the great, vast plains that stretched 1,500 miles to the Rocky Mountains. Pittsburgh had once been the gateway to that great frontier. Settlers rode the Ohio to the heads of the overland westward trails bound for the savage plains and the glittering Pacific coast. Others continued south, down the Mississippi, filled with awe by the vast possibilities of the untamed land.

For those who had stayed in Pittsburgh, there was the promise of forging in open flame that which the country would need to conquer the wilderness and the Indian nations. Pittsburghers took pride in what they had helped to achieve, and that sort of pride and wonder had been passed from father to son, to son. Edward Blanton would have been the first in his family to have not been able to pass that legacy on to his own sons. There are no tall tales of lawyers who performed heroic, awesome deeds to forge a nation, after all.

Edward Blanton had tried. He'd believed in possibilities. Perhaps that is what failed him, and may fail us all in the end – the belief in an unattainable ideal that can never be achieved. But still we reach out in the near-dark, grasping for that which we can never grab hold of. Perhaps it is that promise of hope that pushes us on.

Naked and without grace as we are, it is all we have.

FINIS