Custody

Installment Eight
June 2024

Part Three

Monday morning
September 28, 1992

345

Rosalyn greeted Alex at her front door. Linda was awake after her long sleep and having breakfast, whose aroma of bacon and toasted muffins escaped out into the quad, wafting in wait for the scent of baked beans and barbecue. None of the three ladies would be participating in the academic life of **HAPPYDALE** this clear and warm Monday.

Linda was excited to tell Miss Alex that, "Mr. Hart is coming today. He and my mom have some appointments to see about me getting better."

Alex was glad to hear she'd see Danny again. She felt they had too fast a parting at the hospital and was curious to see if he had heard anything about Dominic getting home after she and Linda left him at his train.

As it turned out, Hart arrived at **HAPPYDALE** only about fifteen minutes after she began to sit with Linda and re-read the hospital discharge papers while Rosalyn finished getting herself ready to leave.

Beatriz Grey had seen his car reappear and wondered what he was doing there. She was only just now entering her office to start her day and had not yet heard Rosalyn's phone message about following up with medical specialists for Linda, with Hart's help, while Linda recuperated at home with Alex. She did not have enough time to go back over and inquire. Her first of two student appointments began in ten minutes, with the second just fifteen minutes after that.

346

Miss Hayes had again phoned Angie Flynn early that morning and adjusted the time to pick up Godfrey Mellon. He would arrive three trains earlier, so he had a half hour to review a few things with her over coffee in the diner before they had to go to court.

Fortunately, Karidja Soro was going to be on the train immediately before Mellon's, so their paths would not cross prematurely. She was to meet Detective Howe. They too were going to compare notes before the arraignment, but not at a diner. Howe had secured keys for the scene of the crime—the apartment building and its basement area. They were going so as to familiarize the lawyer with the physical layout. She would be able to speak to the judge more passionately as she showed him the police photos taken right after the Sunday attack.

Howe's captain had requested that the same bailiff from the hospital be assigned to the bail-or-remand hearing. He explained that Howe was still not going to have her firearm, and he knew Aello to be dangerous, even in handcuffs. He complimented the bailiff on her prior actions to protect the judge, the stenographer, medical personnel, and others assembled for the hospital proceeding the evening before. Her supervisor had little choice but to accede to his request. The captain informed Howe of the protection detail. She was pleased he had asked, and even moreso that he succeeded in the effort.

The only regret that Howe expressed to Soro was that for a reason he would not explain, Hart would not be present. He had, however, forwarded Riley's status report as of five-fifteen that morning from the hospital, when he left the message expressing his apology for his absence. Karidja assured her that, "In my experience of Danny Hart on this case, his absence at an important event has only meant he is surely attending to a yet-to-be-revealed matter even more essential to the health and safety of that little girl."

Detective Howe asked, "Why wouldn't he just explain that when he excused himself?"

The lawyer laughed and said, "Both times that come to mind involved matters he was all-too-reluctant to share, for extraordinarily good reasons."

"Well, I have to admit that I find it—and him sometimes—frustrating," she confessed.

"Oh, he certainly can be—and is. But he has immense trust in the people he has chosen to allow to work with him. It does not come easy to him. But we have Dominic Corredor to thank for bringing him a long way down that path," claimed the lawyer.

"You sound like my desk sergeant, Ms. Soro. He is a real taskmaster, yet, somehow, he has a soft spot for Danny Hart, it seems," she mused.

"Or he has one for you, and knows that Danny Hart is good for you. Of course, that might be the conflict resolutionist in me making that observation," she noted. "As my friend and colleague Ms. Costa would comment right now, as you are about to disagree with me, 'Just sayin'."

347

They hadn't left HAPPYDALE more than five minutes before. Danny was using the road back to the Interstate, by habit, since Rosalyn had told him during the night that the bearer bonds were back in New York.

Her tone took Danny aback a bit, when she asked him, "So, what's the plan, Mr. Man?"

At times like this, he realized that his attitudes and vocabulary had been inescapably influenced by his contact with Gabriella Costa. "For real?" he said.

"Absolutely. I want to know the whole thing. I just got strung along in Philadelphia by a phantasmagoric man out of a Magritte painting and a mystery voice on a phone who thought he was a hip gangster loan shark. Men . . . men . . . men."

"I don't know anything about that, I'm afraid. So I can't address it, even if I, frankly, had a true understanding of what you said," he expressed. "Let me tell you one thing, Mrs. Lowry. You are a lot more learned and schooled than I am. We come from very different places. You and I do not see the world the same way. And this trip today is not about trying to convert one of us to the other's vision," he took a breath, and she jumped in before the exhale.

"So, what is it about then, Mr. Hart?" she queried.

"I thought we just did this already. Let me try again. Stated objectively . . . it's about keeping Linda Lowry out of the state system . . . because it isn't

healthy for kids like her . . . she deserves better . . . and to accomplish that at least one of her parents must be granted her custody . . . and my preference is irrelevant in that matter . . . I have no preconceived or real experienced notion of what or who her mother or father really is like . . . but her father is mistakenly out of the picture because of a very bad man who stole money long ago . . . and used it build a life . . . and felt threatened by him . . . and her mother is about to go to jail for a long time . . . because of some of that same stolen money . . . and if I can get it unstolen in the next few hours . . . I can keep her out of prison . . . and her daughter out of a place worse than that . . . because at least her mother would get an hour's fresh air and three meals a day . . . even though they both may get raped repeatedly for years and years with no recourse." His driving speed had increased by fifteen miles an hour during his explanation. Fortunately, he was moving under the limit when he started and the policewoman clocking him from her cruiser in the trees had a higher threshold for pulling drivers over and issuing them tickets.

As she had done several times in the night, she ignored most of what he said and pulled on just one thread. "Unstolen?" she remarked. "And what does that mean, may I be so humbled to ask?"

"So back to our agreement to be truth tellers, if we may. You did not spend, redeem, cash in, or otherwise convert any of the bonds you came by? Is that correct?"

She said it was.

"And you still have all the bonds. Some in your HAPPYDALE briefcase on your lap. And the rest in one accessible location in New York State. Is that correct?

She said it was.

"Will you tell me that location now please?" he requested.

"Only when you tell me the plan. If I think it will work, then I'll tell you," she volleyed back.

"The plan is to secure all the bonds, without getting caught doing it. Then before the Federal Treasury announces this afternoon that they have broken the case and will recover the remaining bonds, while arresting the

thieves, we are going to return the bonds to the local authorities, not the Feds."

She interrupted him before he could finish. "And why in the name of the gods and all that's holy would I do that, Mr. Man?" she exploded at him. "Haven't you been listening. Do you know what happens to women who try to bargain with the legal system? They get screwed. Royally. Every time. No exceptions!" she fumed. "I've seen it time and time again . . . from high school . . . to college . . . and in the workplace from school to school—"

And now it was his turn to interrupt. "In college, like your AP with Marie Aello that just might have gotten my friend Riley killed and left his dog dead?" he asked in the type of quiet voice Karidja Soro taught them was ten times more effective than screaming, which is what he really wanted to do.

He did not inhale this time, giving her no chance to break in. "Are you going to tell me that when she doesn't make bail in the next few hours . . . and gets locked up so she can't make good on her phone threat . . . which, by the way, is why you said you called me in the middle of the night . . . and come after your daughter to beat her pretty face and little body to a bloody pulp with a heavy metal bar . . .and makes you watch her while she does it . . . that she is getting a raw deal from the justice system . . . because, after all, she is a woman?"

He went on, "That oncologist and that lawyer have done bad things. Mrs. Lowry. It doesn't matter that they are white and rich and in an entitled class in our society. It doesn't matter that he's not a eunuch and she may be, who knows? They did bad things. That's the only reason they are going to be tried, found guilty—yes in the name of one god, at least, and all that's holy to many people—and go to jail for a long time."

He inhaled but she did not interrupt this time. "So, if we can unsteal the bonds you have, we have a chance to not have you convicted of doing a bad thing—at least in this instance. We can give them back and if that is not acceptable to you—maybe the fact that you could claim a ten percent finder's fee reward for doing so is something you might find appealing."

Rosalyn was really listening apparently, because Hart was able to take two breaths, repress his increasing rage, and still talk calmly. Karidja would have been proud. "But we must beat the Feds to the punch. And my friends in

the police force are stalling to give you time. But it's running out very quickly." He looked across at her, as she continued to fume and stare at him in anger. "And that, is the plan, Mrs. Lady."

"The bonds are where they started out," she told him.

"In the same bank?" he asked.

"Just in my safe deposit box instead of that eccentric old man's," she declared simply.

"For how long?" he asked.

"She said, "Two days after they went missing."

"And the cash?" he wondered aloud.

"Not there. You said you would not ask about that," she said. "Are you reneging? Not keeping your word? Not being honest?" she excoriated him in word and tone, as if to prove the point she was making all along.

"I only wanted to make sure it was not there, is all," he said.

"Why?" she demanded. "Are you going to extort it out of me, Mr. Man?"

"I have no interest in that, Rosalyn," was his retort, in an even tone.

"Because if all that is in the safety deposit box are those bonds, this becomes much easier. So think, please. Is there anything else in that box than the bonds? This is important." He asserted.

"Maybe a cobweb or some mold," she couldn't resist; couldn't help herself. "How easier?"

"Now it's my turn, Rosalyn. And I hope you can let your anger go and trust me for a half day. Please tell me how you came by the bonds. And what your connection is to the oncologist who had the other half of them. That true story gets you off the hook and back home to Linda."

"So how much do you think you know and what do you not know?" she was bargaining as the precious miles passed under their tires as they crossed the George Washington Bridge.

"You're kidding, right?" he asked, changing lanes to get onto the parkway he wanted to use, and whose lanes were the least crowded with Monday morning late September traffic.

She turned away and looked down river. "Am I?" she prodded.

Exasperated, he submitted. "Highlights only, in the interest of time?"

"Okay, you can try that, I'll see if it's enough," she parried.

He decided to throw down a gauntlet first, however. "If you quote King's *Misery* back at me once more, I'll pull over and let you out on the side of the road. I don't want to hear another word from either Annie Wilkes or Kathy Bates coming out of your mouth. I'm done with the assimilations. And your resistance to this is futile and fatal for your daughter. Understand?"

When she didn't answer and just kept looking downriver, he took that for a 'yes.'

"Highlights, then. Bearer bonds and cash were stuffed in disguise, in two camping or school backpacks, rather than standardized brown locking cash receipt sacks. Couriers were diverted from the eccentric's planned train ride. They were waylaid, forced into an armored van, driven to a remote location and abandoned, not to be found for quite some time, how much I have forgotten. A mentally disadvantaged newspaper delivery man was frightened into carrying the backpacks away from the scene. Neither was ever found or heard from again, until very recently. A retired law enforcement person vouches for the fellow, name of 'Petey,' who still is alive and living in an undisclosed retreat. Feds think LeClerc has used his half of the bonds' value to start a health care practice, but is running out of money. They have strong leads that someone by the name of Lowry has the rest, fate unknown. Treasury thinks they can squeeze LeClerc for the Lowry identity and location."

"Did you look into Dennis Clark?" she quizzed.

"No time. No source," he admitted.

"Dennis Clark was seventeen and thought he was a big man. He used a learner's permit like a driver's license and got away with it by cruising in a town a few over from where he lived with his parents. He'd park under the railroad trestles in the parking lots of Lowry's hometown. One night he's drinking and doing some weed alone in his car. He attracts the attention of college coed walking under the tracks to catch a train back to Manhattan. She gets in the car, flips her bag into the back seat, they start to party. Its quick money for her and a satisfied sex fantasy for him. He gets a spasm and as his good fortune has it, he pulls on the headlight switch on the dash. He startles an idiot—figuratively and literally—running right then in front of the car. He goes spastic, drops two backpacks on the pavement in front of the car, and hightails it into the bushes, never to return, apparently. Clark goes out and picks up the bags, throws them in the back of his car and kills the lights, he thinks. But he doesn't push it in far enough—apparently his mechanics and his car's mechanisms are similarly dysfunctional. But he keeps trying and smoking with the coed, until he gets aggressive. Men ... men ... men ... are first . . . boys . . . boys . . . boys. And for the second time in the same night, but this time as ill fortune has it, another pedestrian comes along. A Good Samaritan teenager. He sees the parking lights are on and it looks like the car is empty, Clark still trying to get sort of busy for his forty bucks, low in the front set. The teen reaches in to push the light switch in to kill the lights and finds himself tangled up with Clark, the two of them yelling and screaming. The coed reaches in the back seat to get her backpack for the train, grabs it, and is off to the races. Turns out she got a better snatch than Clark, who in the end got none, by the way. She only discovers the mix-up on the train to school. Since she had heard about traveling on the subway with no ID to get traced to school by muggers or cops for underage drinking, Clark never finds out who was his flight of fancy, who then was still going by her maiden name, since even though she wasn't a maiden, was still unmarried. A day later it was all over the news. The coed returned to the scene of the original crime, opened an oversize commercial safety deposit box and put the papers, minus a score or two of them, in a different container, of course, and laid them nicely to bed where they've been sleeping ever since."

"And you have the key with you, I hope to God?" Danny invited.

Rosalyn reached into her blouse and extracted a necklace with a key on the chain. "Right here, Mr. . . . Hart."

They were already onto the Cross Island Parkway heading south to the Southern State when her tale of treasure and treachery was told for the very first time. She felt like calling him Rumpelstiltskin but passed on the temptation. He had angered her so, and after all he did not want her to take her firstborn away from her as his reward. She wanted him to have no power to tempt her to do anything.

"So, what now?" she challenged.

"I need to get to a phone before we arrive in town," he told her.

348

Mellon arrived as advertised three trains earlier than need be for the arraignment. Detective Howe and Attorney Soro were well clear of the PATH station by the time he arrived. Just as they had departed for their preparation for the arraignment, so too did Flynn drive Mellon to the diner directly without him asking, as Miss Hayes had required.

They ordered a proper diner breakfast of eggs and hash browns and meat. Flynn had hers scrambled with a ham steak. Mellon had his fried over easy with bacon. She had a glass of cold milk and a cup of hot coffee. He had fresh orange juice with his coffee.

Mellon began the conversation. "What else can you tell me that you learned while accompanying Mr. Hart, Miss Flynn?"

She had readied herself. She began with what she knew he knew, but told him less. "I think that four people knew one another in their college years. They seem involved somehow in this divorce and custody business. They are Mr. and Mrs. Lowry, Ms. Aello, and a woman now also at the country boarding school, a Mrs. Valerie McKinley. I haven't heard how they knew each other, or where or how they met, except that it was while they were in school at either Barnard or Columbia twenty some years ago. But apparently the McKinley woman helped Mrs. Lowry and her daughter flee the morning of the hearing. There was some talk about how she was instrumental, or not, in getting Mrs. Lowry a job and student placement for her daughter out there at HAPPYDALE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL."

Next, she transitioned still to things that were accurate, but she did not know how much he knew. "Mr. Hart thinks that Mrs. Lowry—probably helped by Mrs. McKinley because she has a car—came back to that apartment building at least twice after she initially fled. Once was in the late evening. It seemed she came back for clothing and personal belongings that she and her daughter would need at the school, but that she was unable to carry away when she first fled. The second time Hart was more uncertain about. At the apartment basement, which I did not know about to check on each week, someone pilfered items the Lowrys had in storage. It is unknown whether it was Mr. Lowry or Mrs. Lowry. When I first saw the place, when Ms. Aello demanded entry, it looked like both of their cages had been disturbed, but resecured."

With her eggs finished and some hash browns and half her ham still untouched, Angie departed from fact to wander into a land of speculation. Here was where she wanted to twist things around for Mellon again and get him worked up about the custody case. He'd get distracted for one. And he'd realize the more he helped Aello stay out of jail today, the more he advanced Myles's case for custody down the road.

Images always helped her keep her mind moving to spin such tales. So this morning she tried to recall how gold rush settlers in California and Alaska and Australia would stake a claim, in hope or in greed. Mellon looked too out of shape to be climbing in and out of river valleys to pan for riches. But she was convinced she could lure him with fool's gold. "They didn't talk much about those cages in my presence. Hart and Riley would go out back or into a corner to sort of whisper. And Riley's dog was always nearby. I'm quite frightened by that dog, sir, truth be known. If Aello hadn't killed him, I'd warn you to stay the hell away from there."

"Wait now, Flynn. At the arraignment we must make sure the judge knows Howe shot that dog. The police killed that dog, not my client." He was practicing being adamant about the point.

Flynn cut him no slack. "I wouldn't go there, Mr. Mellon."

"What are you saying, Flynn. Are you telling me how to run a bail hearing? I've been doing this for years," he insisted.

"I mean no disrespect. But I feel obligated to say two things. In assault cases here in New Jersey, during the commission of a felony, which this burglary was, judges have very little patience for hair-splitting attorneys. Your client had really walloped that dog with her bar and then lanced him with it in the chest. I would expect the other lawyer will have pictures to prove that. And if the police took the pictures, they will be there to testify they did, and that they are genuine photos."

"What 'other' attorney? They will have a public prosecutor on hand as far as I know. It's going to be some mindless automaton, who probably looked at the file an hour beforehand in a car for hire. I'll dance all over his shoes."

"Attorney Mellon, since the Lowrys were who Aello robbed, their attorney will represent, I'd expect."

"Flynn, I am Mrs. Lowry's attorney, and Aello's. I've got this." He proclaimed, pushing hash browns onto his fork.

"Hart said Attorney Soro was showing up." She claim-jumped him and knocked him off his overturned burro. Two jackasses on the ground with one push, she would tell Hart later in recounting the breakfast. Mellon's potatoes went tumbling off his fork, and he angrily felt some fall right into his lap.

"Why?" he demanded too forcefully. It made Angie remember how he spoke about Soro the day before.

"I wasn't told, and I was afraid to tip my hand by asking," she reported. "I was guessing it was because Aello was stealing that letter I told you about. That attorney seems to have an interest in what Ned wrote in that letter. She hasn't been able to get it read in open court or been allowed to have it in advance of the next divorce and custody hearing. So, since it's evidence in this case, she's going to try to get it admitted and read, under the guise of proving Aello was intentionally injuring anyone—man or beast as she was heard to swear—who got in her way. But what Soro really wants is to use it against your case for Mrs. Lowry to win custody. Do you know what's in the letter, sir. Will it be okay for you and for Mrs. Lowry?"

She thought that was quite enough for one sitting. She put her coffee cup down with a little extra bit of a clatter. It broke through Mellon's tortured

contemplations. He hand-signaled the waiter for the check and they got ready to leave for the courthouse.

349

The first student Beatriz had scheduled was the youngest. She wanted to warm up on the one she thought it would be easier to intimidate. But Katie did not seem too worried about being summoned. Her first reaction was that at least she might miss some of a class she didn't care for anyway. And for seconds, she didn't think the lady administrator was much of a challenge. She seemed too polite every time Katie saw her around campus. Her mother, Margie, sure did not appear concerned when she heard Katie had to go to the office. She even suggested at breakfast that Grey might be asking Katie to be a volunteer during the evening's party on the quad.

So, when the overdressed woman sat behind her desk and Katie was in a smaller and lower chair in front of her, the young girl had a change of heart. She worried that someone had snitched on her for smoking out behind the trees.

"Katie, you have taken care of Linda Lowry for her mother a few times. Is that right?" was the first surprise question.

"Yes," was all she thought it was smart to admit. She wondered if Mrs. Lowry had complained about something she had done. She thought maybe that was why she didn't get asked to stay with Linda when her mother went to Philadelphia.

"One time you were there was at night when Mrs. Lowry and your mother went out to town. Is that right?" quizzed Grey.

That question confused Katie. Now she wasn't certain whether this was about herself, or Mrs. Lowry, or her mom. "Yes, I did."

"I want to ask you two questions about that night, so think back to it, please," directed the administrator. After giving the freshman a moment, she asked, "Was there a man who came to the house that night? While you were there alone, or with Mrs. Lowry when she came home?"

Katie answered, "I have never met Mr. Lowry."

Ms. Grey's retort was sharper than she intended. 'I didn't say anything about who the man was. I just want to know if a man came—or called on the phone."

Shaken, Katie bit her lip. She realized as only a ninth grader can, that her confidence was shattered, and adults can become scary very fast. "No one came. No one called," she stammered, trying not to let this person in authority see her cry.

Before she could recover, Grey was on her again, "What did your mother and Mrs. Lowry talk about when they came home? What did they tell you about their night out?"

"She gave me my money and we went home. It was late. It was a school night. We didn't stay. I remember. I'm sure." And as only a ninth-grade girl can, Katie got resentful and intractable. "I'm going to be late for class. I should go," she proclaimed in a blindingly fast turnaround, which Grey neither expected, nor for which was prepared.

As Katie hurriedly picked up her backpack lying by her feet, she didn't even look at the administrator as she got up and headed for the door.

Realizing that things did not go the way she intended, and not trusting herself to let it happen again, she decided on a different approach for her second interview. She may have even called it off if she hadn't seen, through the doorway that Katie left open, that Taylor McKinley was already sitting on the visitor's bench waiting her turn to come in.

What Grey didn't see was Katie's free hand, blocked as it was by her torso. The two girls locked eyes as Katie was rushing out. She kept her arm in close and pointed backwards, indicating Grey, and then flashed her middle finger to alert Taylor, who she hardly knew, but whom she felt obligated to warn.

"How are you doing Taylor?" Beatriz started off the session.

"I'm fine," said the normally talkative senior, mindful of Katie's caution. She was still interpreting much of reality through the eyes of a new

teen driver. So she thought of Katie as one daytime driver flashing high beams at an oncoming car to communicate a speed trap was set up around the bend.

"I was curious about the times you have spent with the Lowrys, alone and with your mother. Have there been many? And can you tell me about them, please?" she probed from behind her desk.

"Is this a review of me, or of Mrs. Lowry? I know I'm applying to colleges and she's new to teaching here, so I want to make sure I answer correctly." Taylor McKinley's reply demonstrated once again to Beatriz Grey that she still had not learned how to understand and treat the more senior girls in her school, whose family and social lives were fraught with split loyalties between divorced parents.

She ignored the girl and answered her question with a question. "I wanted to know if your mother or Mrs. Lowry ever talk to you about men other than your father or Mr. Lowry." This was a statement and not a question.

"My mother has never talked to me about other specific men. My mother talks to me as little as she needs to about my father. I don't aggravate my mother by talking about my father after he has a visitation day we spend together." She took a breath and then related proudly, "What my mother does talk to me about—as often as there's something horrible on the news or we see someone acting badly—is how I should be ready to protect myself from adults, men especially, but not exclusively, who mean to harm or hurt me or my friends or my family." And before Grey could respond, "My mother keeps reminding me of this as I get ready to get my driver's license and as I apply to colleges. She says **HAPPYDALE** has been a safe place and that I should appreciate that, but things will change in our lives."

Beatriz Grey decided she would let Yvonne's evening barbecue and public kiss of thanks settle the issue with Rosalyn Lowry. Admitting her defeat to herself only, she told Taylor. "Your mother is absolutely right. **HAPPYDALE** is a safe place. Thank you for coming to my office. You can go back to class now."

350

As instructed during the phone call, Rosalyn and Danny walked into the hometown bank branch in the railroad plaza. Asking to see the manager in private, they were shown into an office with two chairs facing a desk with a glass top protector, an empty set of in-and-out trays, and a collection of imprinted pens in a circular, leather-covered container somewhat bigger than a frozen Tropicana can.

It was not lost on either of them, that they sat in chairs expectantly arranged for a married couple hoping to fulfill their dream of home ownership, at the will and whim of the man who entered and took his seat facing them.

"What may we do for you today, Mr. and Mrs. . . .?" he twice presumed.

"We are not married," he said, trying to be a buffer for what he suspected was coming.

"We are not even a couple," she said.

"I apologize," the manager said.

The woman inquired, "Is there a bank director on the premises, who is your supervisor, by any chance?"

"I hardly think . . . I did not mean to offend . . ." He did not know what to say.

"It's not about that at all. Is there such a person, perhaps in the offices on the upper floors?" Rosalyn was enjoying herself, seeing him squirm, on the ground level of a three-story edifice.

The manager excused himself to go up to see the director. As he left them alone, he drew the door to the office closed quietly to protect their privacy.

Rosalyn looked at Danny with amusement and asked, "How am I doing" . . . and then, drippingly . . . "honey?"

Hart smiled, "You can have your fun . . . but you might do well to remember you are going to need these guys . . . and they will be tripping over themselves for you enough anyway."

It was not long before a man came into the office. He was dressed more stiffly than the manager, with a more expensive watch and impressive cuff links. He had obviously been briefed on the customers before him. He chose not to sit, at first. He noticed she had a legal sized attaché case—resting against the chair leg by her left foot, away from the man's side of her seat.

Standing next to the desk, and not behind it, he half ceded the power position in the room. "How may the bank be of assistance to you this morning?" he asked, addressing the woman and not the man.

It was, however, the man who spoke. The bank director could not know, and neither could Rosalyn Lowry, that what Danny Hart was about to say would remind him of the very first thing that Detective Howe told him in a police station across the Hudson a month ago. "It's actually more what she can do for you today, Mister Director." Hart wore a faux-friendly smile and extended his left arm, palm up, toward the chair behind the desk.

"She is thinking of providing you with an unexpected windfall, sir," Hart stated. "Perhaps you would like to take a seat, as this will be a few minutes."

The director eyed them both. He cast a look out the plate window into the lobby to see where the security guard was positioned. Danny recognized the gaze without even seeing behind him. "It's not something he can help you with this morning, director. But your concern is not without huge irony, as you will see."

The meaning of Hart's comment would soon become apparent, but for the moment the director was very ill at ease.

Rosalyn reached down without taking her eyes off the director. She placed the attaché face down so as to conceal the school logo. It had served its entry-gaining purpose for the morning and was now unnecessary to display. She unzippered the case and slid out several large manilla envelopes into a neat stack. Hart saw some of the tape adhesive residue in the overhead

fluorescent ceiling lights' reflections. Taking one of the envelopes she said, "These are samples only of what I came to give you back today." She opened the end tab flap and extracted the contents onto the glass, which helped them glide dramatically toward the director. "I believe you should have a list of these certificate numbers to verify their origin."

The director was not at this bank, nor even a director, nor even employed by this institution when these certificates were last aligned in a back room of this building and set out for transfer. Nevertheless, legends have a way of illuminating even the dimmest imaginations of high-level functionaries in the financial world.

"It can't be," was all he said.

"And why is that, Mister . . ." As she paused, Danny hoped she would not fall back on Annie Wilkes. But instead, she assimilated Mrs. Danvers' polite and exaggerated arrogance so far away from Manderley, . . . "Director?"

"I couldn't say," he stumbled to exclaim.

She helped the discussion along, as Danny told her they were advised to do. "I believe, sir, that there is a reward."

"From the insurance company, not from the bank," he informed her, trying to reclaim the high ground.

"They have a branch here in town. How about you phone them and have them send over someone . . ." and here the word she said next was spoken with more disdain than du Maurier's Danvers ever projected to the second Mrs. de Winter . . . "authorized" . . . "to discuss the reward." She saw that Hart was right about them tripping over themselves before this morning was over, because he almost stubbed his shoe in the carpeting as he went to the door.

351

Hammersmith and her captain accompanied Denison LeClerc from their lockup to County Superior Court for arraignment. They had succeeded in making the transfer prior to receiving any federal notifications of Treasury's interest in charging or detaining the oncologist.

The ADA prevailed over the public defender at the arraignment. LeClerc was made to face only the state charges involving the car crash and subsequent related actions. Nothing involving professional liability or Medicare fraud or medical malpractice, nor alleged financial crimes that Treasury was assembling, were included

Only certain legal arguments being heard elsewhere about the government's proper use of wiretaps—which neither local law enforcement nor LeClerc knew anything about—were obstacles to those theft and money-laundering charges being filed and an arrest warrant being sworn out.

Another delay occurred because it took Treasury two days to validate all the documentation needed to prove that, until he was eighteen and he legally had it changed in a Mineola courthouse, the man who went as Denison LeClerc in 1992 was named Dennis Clark at birth. He was a resident in a town not far from the pilfered bank branch and the location of his currently shuttered medical practice on Long Island.

LeClerc was bound over without bail, which was denied, because the judge considered the severity of Myles's injuries as evidence of the willful brutality of LeClerc's vehicular attack. The jurist also declared he was inclined to make sure the oncologist remained in custody until such time as the outcomes of his victim's injuries were established, particularly if they proved fatal. LeClerc was told the court wanted to make certain he was unable to flee to avoid any subsequent charges of vehicular homicide.

The doctor was remanded to County Corrections in East Meadow for imprisonment until his trial date, which was set for the first Monday in March.

352

Marie Aello's arraignment in Jersey was supposed to go significantly less contested. But that turned out not to be the case. Long before she found herself in front of the judge, with Mellon at her side and the unarmed Detective Howe and briefcased Attorney Soro on the other side of the room with the ADA from Newark, she was in shackles and closeted in a room consulting with her attorney.

"You have made some serious mistakes, Miss Aello." Mellon was telling her after five minutes of explaining the pending procedure of arraignment.

"Just get me the fuck out of here, old man," she demanded.

"It won't be that simple. And you must call to mind your legal experience and control yourself before this tribunal, please," he requested.

"You don't trust me to know how to behave? Is that it, attorney?" she suggested snidely.

Mellon dropped all pretense. "That may not all I don't trust about you, Aello."

She rattled her wrist restraints, linked as they were to a ring in the center of the table she sat belly-up against. "You're very fortunate, sir, that I have been gifted with this incarceration jewelry. I just may still strangle you if you get close enough."

"I must confess, I have never been comfortable being too close to you, Marie," he chuckled.

"Go ahead and laugh. We'll see which of us does that in the last frame of this cartoon," she sneered.

In a softer, more approachable voice, he told her, "Please tell me what that envelope was about, that you said was worth almost a hundred thousand dollars, Marie. If I had a better idea of that, I might be able to

convince this judge to fix bail, regardless of the amount, and get you out of here."

"Why should I, Godfrey. I don't see where it's going to make a difference. Remember I went to law school, too. And for free!" she reminded him of their fathers' shared secrets of the past. He did not care for that one bit.

She was ratcheted down and they were back to using their given names again. They both seemed to sense time was not to be wasted here much longer.

"If I knew the contents, I could talk with you about whether it's in our interest to keep it away from Attorney Soro," he offered.

"Our interest, Godfrey? You mean mine or the both of ours?" she put to him.

"Both, I'm afraid," he told her. "If Soro influences the ADA to make it part of this hearing and requests the judge to read what's in it to the court, it will go to your intent. You can't deny out there in front of the judge that you know what's inside, because he's been told you addressed the envelope to Mrs. Lowry. Under oath, he'll make you admit that, or not, before deciding on her motion."

"What's in this for you, Godfrey. Spill, or I clam up." She stared him down.

"I am also trying to get ready for this afternoon's deadline for challenging Bruce's audit. Since you may be remanded, I'm looking out for your interests at that venue also. Whether you want to accept the audit or not. Last week you said you wouldn't until you got this envelope and destroyed it. So how do I defend you, Marie? Now? And later today?"

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"If I can succeed in keeping that envelope closed when we go outside, it won't be available during the afternoon's challenge. The ADA will hold it for evidence and Soro won't have a look at it. But we might be able to resurrect it at a later time, depending on what language we use to accept the

audit as is." Mellon knew he had gotten her thinking now, because she did not have a wise crack or a fast answer as a comeback. That's how he had learned she acted, after years of bickering with her.

"Godfrey. Is this about her kid and custody from her old man? Or is it about you protecting someone's father?" she asked. "Because if it's about her kid. I'd love for you to give her to Myles and let Rosalyn lose that fight forever. It would serve the bitch right. As you know, since she's screwed me twice already—figuratively only, stop smirking—there's no love lost between us." Marie wondered if she had asked Mellon too many questions, because his face went a little contorted.

He ignored her convoluted inquiries. "What do you mean 'someone's' father?" he asked intently.

"What?" she asked.

"You said, 'someone's' father. Whose father did you mean, Marie, if you weren't talking about Ned Hegerman?" He was flushed from the neck to the chin. And it wasn't razor burn from trying to impress the judge.

For the first time in some days, Marie Aello was actually afraid. Mellon was hiding something from her. And she did not know what it was. If he thought she was doing the same, he would be in the unique position within ten minutes of having her thrown in jail for god-knew-how-long, and inciting the judge enough to have his honor throw away the key.

"I don't understand what you are asking me, Godfrey. Or even why you are asking." It was the first time in a long time that she was being purely honest with him. And just as Aesop's little kid prone to repeating 'wolf . . .wolf . . . wolf. . .' ad nauseum, as the lawbooks said, Godfrey did not believe her.

All Mellon could think about was Angie Flynn's counterfeit intel from across the river that someone was sure the envelope had a letter in it from a newlywed Rosalyn Lowry and that it would probably reveal Mellon's father's fraud and, eventually, disclose his subsequent blackmail.

Aello did not connect the rising gleam in his eyes with Godfrey's decisions: no envelope would be opened now, and no audit would be

contested later in the day. And Marie Aello would be behind bars by dinnertime. All he had to lose in such a scenario was some commission fees. The settlement in the current audit of Ned's assets—Aello's inheritance, without the Trust's value attached—would still cripple Hegerman's law firm. Mellon would still have his revenge.

Otherwise, there would be an open envelope, a contested audit over the excluded trust, and Godfrey and his father would be the ones imprisoned. Thus, just like Ned Hegerman realized on what would soon become his deathbed, Godfrey Mellon would be the next victim for Marie Aello and Rosalyn Lowry, as they continued to wage their blood feud over time, without it being their blood that flowed.

He stood up. "Okay, Marie. As you wish." He headed for the door. "I'll tell them we are ready."

As if it were scripted by Mellon's hand, the arraignment went forward.

Aello saw the same tall bailiff from the Department of Corrections come into the room as Mellon departed. She came across, holding the collapsed baton in one hand and the keys to the restraints in the other. She tucked the baton under her armpit and told the prisoner very quietly. "If you ever look at me again the way you did in that mirror last night, you'll be in a wheelchair in your cell. And some night, after a sufficient number of years, when you least expect it, you'll be released from both of those ghastly imprisonments forever. And whatever part of you then joins the universe will long to return to them both."

All the principals stood in a row, much as Aello had envisioned. The judge asked Mellon if he had anything to say for his client before her charges were read. He said he did not. She stood mute. The judge instructed the ADA to state the charges. He read out the same things, identically phrased, that Mellon and Aello heard in her hospital room the prior day. Detective Howe and Attorney Soro were hearing them for the first time. They seemed to accept the charges as suitable and complete, for the moment.

The judge said, "Does the state have anything else to add?"

The ADA was succinct. "Only, Your Honor, that the District Attorney will be bringing more charges if the condition or fate of the victim, Mr. Michael Riley, merit additional adjudication."

"Do Detective Howe or Attorney Soro have anything they would care to address to the court?" the judge requested.

Aello tensed and Mellon rolled his fingers into a fist. Howe saw and would tell Soro later if she did not. Each of the women said, "No. Your Honor."

The judge adjusted his attention to the other side of the courtroom. He simply intoned a name, as he had done so many times before, just filling in the blank as appropriate. "Mr. Mellon?"

Godfrey's lack of experience was telling. He took a moment trying to remember what he was supposed to do or say. Aello's eyes bugged. She leaned her whole body into his to nudge him with her hip. The bailiff took a step forward in case she was needed to protect counsel, which was the hope she could not publicly admit. Finally . . . "Yes, Your Honor. The defendant requests consideration of bail." He knew that was not the proper formulation, as did everyone else present. But the point was taken.

Without urging from the bench, the ADA spoke forcefully. "The state seeks remand, Your Honor. The sheer savagery of the defendant's assault on Mr. Riley and the vicious fatal attack on his dog—"

Aello's voice hissed, being careful not to swear. "I didn't kill the dog. That cop shot it." She tried to point at Howe, but her arms failed her. She was learning rapidly why they were called restraints.

Mellon put his head down and looked at the table before him and his client. While others in the room thought his mumbled words were in defeat to Aello, they were the closest he had come to uttering a prayer of thanks in two days.

The ADA picked up where he left off—"for each of which she bears no remorse . . . the state seeks remand." He knew he needn't say anything else. He was aware from earlier appearances that for this judge, more was less.

"So ordered. The bailiff will escort the prisoner . . ." No one in the room paid any further attention or needed to know any more, except the court date of "on or before the third Thursday of July 1993."

Godfrey Mellon did not bother to seek out his client after she was escorted from the court. He turned and looked to see that Angie Flynn was sitting in the back row, with his overcoat. They left together to get him to the PATH, so he could regroup in time to decide about his afternoon scheduled appointment with the Black lady from Africa, who still stood next to the stoic woman in the protective vest with the name HOWE on tape above her breast.

353

Three men came into the bank office, in a single file line. The lack of chairs made two of them stand along the wall on Danny's side of the room, while the bank director went behind the desk, but he also did not sit down.

"This is the gentleman you requested from the insurer. And it just so happens that in his office there was an agent from the US Treasury Department on another matter. So, he came along as well." Even Danny thought he was acting like a smug prick. He could only fantasize about what Rosalyn was cooking up in her witch's brew.

But she surprised him. "As I am originally from this town, I would think it best if Private Investigator Hart was permitted to phone over to the police station up the street and ask Officer Frances to join us. Could you accommodate him please, Mr. Director." She asked pointing to the phone on the credenza along the wall behind the desk, at the same time she nodded to Danny.

Hart stood up and handed his credentials to the bank director, who looked them over, and then passed them on to the other two men. As they looked at them, no room was made for Danny to approach the phone.

The Treasury Agent handed Danny his leather-fold back, which Danny pocketed so it would not get misplaced. As he did, the director said, "Why don't we take this upstairs, please?"

As he started for the door, Rosalyn said, "No, thank you, I don't think so." She looked over her shoulder and waved a hand at the window that looked out on the lobby, and looked in from the lobby as well. "I prefer this more accessible and public space to continue our discussion. I imagine there are chairs some one of your clerks could bring in for the others." She paused. "The phone, sir?" she reminded him.

It happened that the instrument had a long jack wire on it, sufficient for him to pick up the phone and place it on the front of the desk by Hart. Plenty of mortgage applicants over the years most likely had the same courtesy extended to them. He clearly had no desire for Danny to get in with him behind the desk. Hart looked at the push button arrangement and saw icons with emblems for fire, police, and medical. "Are these only for emergencies, or are they speed dials for regular calls?" he asked. Followed by, "I do not have the station number memorized."

The director told him he could just push the button for the switchboard. He did and the call went through.

When the desk sergeant identified himself, Danny said, "Good morning. Sergeant. My name is Danny Hart. I am a licensed Private Investigator in the State of New Jersey. May I please speak to Officer Frances."

"Hello. Danny?" she said. "Is it now?"

"Yes, if you would be so kind. We are with the director, the insurance representative, and an agent from the Treasury Department. We are on the first floor, last account holder office on the left."

He set the handle back on the cradle and sat down. Chairs were in the process of being brought in, so he and Rosalyn scootched over to their left to make room. No one had put a finger on the certificates on the desk.

"Thank you for your patience," Rosalyn told them. "Mr. Hart knows Officer Frances from a local motor vehicle accident case and advised me to wait until she is present to begin. Should we request an additional chair, do you think?" she asked Danny directly.

"If the Officer brings along a stenographer, we probably should," he said, setting the three men even more on edge than they already were at the sight of the bearer bonds and the way the woman was controlling the goings on in the room.

As advertised, Officer Frances had a stenographer in tow, as she had led Danny to believe during their pre-dawn phone call she would be prepared to do.

"Gentlemen, how does this usually proceed, please? I am very new to this," Rosalyn declared. And then she left them to their own devices. The one device that was already proceeding was the stenotype's shorthand keyboard, which they all heard and whose significance they all understood.

The bank director asked Frances, "Are you going to arrest this woman? She has stolen tender," he asserted.

Frances answered, "Our usual procedure in cases of returned property, especially for which there is a posted reward, is to ask the person how the property was come by, and then we go from there. But, first, may I ask if you are absolutely certain these bonds are stolen? And I presume you mean from the unsolved heist from some years ago?"

The insurance man stepped forward. "I have a list of the certificate numbers, in sequence. So, I could determine that—if I may look at the bonds on the desk.

"Here," said Frances. She handed him a pair of crime scene gloves. "They aren't latex, so if you're allergic, don't be concerned." She turned to Danny. "Have you any of these in your vehicle, sir?" When he said he did she said, "Latex?" He said no and she responded, "The car in front with Jersey plates. Is that yours?" He told her it was.

She turned and asked, "Mr. Director, would you please ask your security detail to step in?" When the gentleman stood at the door, Officer Frances addressed him. "Would you please be so kind as to escort this gentleman to his car, it's right out front. You are going to assist him in obtaining a box of protective gloves from his" . . . she turned to Danny . . . "trunk of interior?" . . . "back seat" . . . she repeated that to the uniformed guard, "back seat. Please have him unlock the car, step away where you can

see him, and then reach in an take out that box. Nothing else is to be disturbed. Do you understand?" The guard said he did. It all went as she had said. When Danny returned, he set the box of gloves on the corner of the desk to be available to anyone who needed them.

Watching Hart and Frances, Rosalyn was learning just how much fun being polite could be, while remaining cold and calculating on the inside. She had a new appreciation for author du Maurier's characterizations invested in the Manderley household staff and servants in *Rebecca*. She comprehended that she was being schooled by the policewoman and the investigator in—to quote her query of the others, — 'how this usually proceeds.' She would show them she was a quick study. She would want none of these other avatars' names, she saw them only as functionaries.

The gloved insurance man straightened up, having bent over the bonds to check his list. "These are part of the stolen bond inventory."

"Frances said, "Okay, then, we will hear from this woman how she came by having these bonds." She turned to Rosalyn. "If you would please tell us how you came to have these bonds, we would be very grateful. However, I have to offer you the presence and advice of your attorney, as the recording we are making will have evidentiary value in later hearings, and even perhaps in a court of law."

Rosalyn told her simply, "I'm good. It was a long time ago, but this will be to the best of my ability to remember what happened." Rosalyn told the story of the night Roz Young got in a parked car on her way back to college, with very little elaboration. She left out the wise remarks she peppered through her recital to Danny. The stenographer captured it in its entirety.

The Treasury agent spoke up after Rosalyn was finished her story. "That's not enough," he proclaimed.

"That's all that happened that night in the car," she insisted.

"No. I mean there aren't enough bonds here. I've studied this case and been on it for six years. There have to be more bonds." He asserted very strongly.

"There are more." That was all Rosalyn said. "And there's more to the story."

Frances asked her if she would tell the rest. Danny had already heard once what Rosalyn told again, and that the stenographer recorded. But there were pieces afterwards she did not have time to tell him in the car. He was hoping to hear the rest with the others, as Rosalyn continued.

"First, I have to know a few things," she said. "From you, sir." She had addressed the Treasury man.

"What?" was all he said.

"You heard the honest story so far. Tell me? Am I a thief?" she inquired.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because if you say I am. And if you or Officer Frances here are going to arrest me, I am not saying anything else," she told him straight out.

"Well, I'm not a lawyer—" he started.

"Then why are you talking like one?" she observed. "Either what you heard was criminal or it was not. Which is it?"

"I can not speak for the Department—" again he only got to begin.

"Then we're done until you get someone here who can," and she took a glove from Danny's box and began to slide the bonds back into the one opened envelope.

"Wait, where do you think you're going with that?" said the insurance guy. "We paid for those. They're ours now."

Lowry courteously corrected him. "Not without my reward they're not. There must be some finders-keepers in this somewhere, I'd imagine."

The bank director screamed at Lowry. "You're a crook. And you're not leaving this bank with those bonds."

Rosalyn's voice was very quiet, but fiercely firm. "Where are your manners, sir? Screaming at a lady. How dare you?"

Danny Hart had the worst time keeping a straight face.

Rosalyn continued. "If you demand I be treated as a criminal—"

He interrupted her with a loud voice, not screaming, "I do and—"

Then it was her turn. "In that case, I have no choice but to" . . . and here she scooped up all the envelopes of bonds from the desk before anyone realized she was going to do that . . . "surrender voluntarily to the only legitimate local law enforcement representative here, since the alleged crime occurred in her jurisdiction, and give her all this as material evidence." She handed Officer Frances the envelopes and then extended her hands in a parody of a person about to be handcuffed.

"All right. All right, Hold on. Just wait a minute." It was the Treasury man again. "Let me make a call to my supervisor and get you an answer."

Rosalyn gently took the bonds back from Frances and replaced them on the desk. As the agent started for the door, Rosalyn spoke up. "Oh no, no, no. You will make that call on this phone, on speaker mode, so the stenographer gets both ends of the call and we all here it as well."

"I don't know—" he said before she cut him off.

"I do. That's the deal. Or there's no deal. And you can explain to your supervisor how you screwed up the retrieval of about half the missing—missing, not stolen—bonds from the most embarrassing robbery this man and his bank have ever suffered." And with that, she took the phone from where Danny left it when he called Frances, and nudged it more toward the Treasury man.

Within a half hour, and with an additional Treasury lawyer on the Washington extension, it was determined that if Lowry's story was true, she would not be charged with a theft. And that being the case, would more than likely not be prohibited by Treasury to claim a reward for the safe return of the missing bonds in her possession, with some conditions. The principal condition was that she had never trafficked the bonds or sold any.

With the clock still ticking past that half hour, Rosalyn grilled the lawyer across the phone line. "What does trafficked mean?"

He said, "It means you never sold any bonds or swapped them for cash, at face value or for a reduced value."

But she pushed him further, she wanted to make him talk some more. "What are you not telling me, sir?" she asked.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"I beg to differ with you sir, but you certainly do. If you are not forthright with me, there's no deal and no bonds discovered." She was so insistent that the others in the room were getting antsy and unnerved. Nobody understood what was going on or what Lowry was doing. Including Danny Hart.

"Why do you think that?" he asked.

"Because I recognize your voice. Your tone. And your solicitation." She waited for him to reply. When he didn't, she asked, "Is it customary for lawyers working for Treasury to entrap suspects, sir?" She waited. "May I ask you to tell me where you were this past weekend?" Again, he did not answer. "Five, four, three, two, —"

"I was in Washington and environs," he said flatly.

"Would environs include Philadelphia?" she suggested.

Danny Hart shot a shocked look at Frances.

"I don't believe so," he told her.

Rosalyn said, "au contraire, mon chéri." And then she placed the receiver down on the cradle of the phone very carefully and without making a sound.

"What are you doing," asked the Treasury man, standing nearby.

"Your friends will call back. But it will take them a few minutes. They are engaged in a very heated exchange at the moment."

The room was dead silent for four minutes. People were getting fidgety. A few looked at their wrist watches a number of times. And then the phone rang. Rosalyn looked at the stenographer and pointed to the phone. She left the instrument on speaker and depressed the button to make the connection.

"Is this Mrs. Lowry?" a new voice inquired.

"You know it is," she answered. No one in the room moved. They dared not.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I'm thinking I'm going to use a chunk of this reward money to hire the best lawyer I can find, and I am going to sue you, and your friends, and Treasury for knowingly making my daughter's father a decoy for a thieving, psychotic oncologist and near-on to getting him killed."

Frances checked the clock on the wall and wondered if Maura and her captain were back from LeClerc's arraignment so they could witness what was going on. She remembered the feature on her epaulet radio that allowed her to put her device on silent, but to connect to the station so the dispatcher could hear what was happening. It was a safeguard the manufacturer installed to assist officers in danger and in need of assistance, without alerting the people threatening them that communications were being sent. She reached up casually and triggered the device.

The Treasury man countered. "You did try to sell the bonds, Mrs. Lowry. More than once."

She replied, "No, sir. You have that wrong. And that also means I am right that you tipped off Mr. Kelly Rocco and he told Dennis Clark. All I did in the last few months after my daughter's life was imperiled was to try to discover what value the bonds still had, if any. Listen to your wiretaps, if that's what they're called. I never did anything but ask their value."

"And so?" he said.

"And so, that means this. You tell the insurance man standing here and the Treasury man standing here and the banker man standing here and the local police representative who is here that I am not a thief and that I am eligible for a reward for returning somewhere near half the missing—missing, not stolen—bearer bonds."

"Who is Dennis Clark, Mrs. Lowry?" he asked, ignoring her terms. She knew he was stalling because the deal was being discussed at his end. She was willing to give them a little time to do that, so she went along.

Two more local police officers. A man and a woman came in the room. Officer Frances motioned to them that things were okay and that they should silently listen. She then reached up and touched the radio on her shoulder.

It was her turn to talk, so Rosalyn went ahead. "Dennis Clark is the casanova who found the other half of the bonds and used them to fund a medical career under the name of Denison LeClerc."

"And where is he right now, Mrs. Lowry?"

"I wouldn't have any idea," she told him. I have not seen him since that night in his car—as either one of those personalities.

Before the voice from the speaker could stall any longer, her captain nudged Hammersmith in the back. Her voice resonated across the room, and into the speaker phone. "He's in a jail cell in Nassau County Correctional for what he did to Myles Lowry."

"And who is this speaking?" he asked; realizing it was a different voice.

"Maura Hammersmith, arresting officer. I'm showing your Treasury agent in the room my credentials." The agent spoke up to vouch for her.

Rosalyn said, "You've had enough time now. I don't want my ex-husband diverting attention from me and my daughter. I've been there, done that, as they say." She exhaled, "So you've had enough time to go over this in your room there. What is it? Yes, or no? Crook, or no? Reward, or not?"

"We would be inclined to look on this more favorably if you and your daughter were the full beneficiaries of your reward money. I think we've had enough of lawyers for one day, and a long time after, on this case, Mrs. Lowry. What do you say?" he summarized.

She knew it was his best offer. "Deal. As long as the insurance man says so." And turning to him she said, "And he has five minutes to agree and state my percentage or I go to the newspapers for the afternoon editions." She eyeballed him. "His answer will determine the headlines—'he'll have egg on the face or he'll be bringing home the bacon,' as my dead mother used to say about my wayward dad."

They waited. He looked at the memo pad he drew from his jacket pocket. "You have half of them, you say?" he asked her.

"I'm only guessing. Two backpacks. One apiece." She replied.

"Ten percent. I'm prepared to offer ten percent as a reward, or finder's fee, if you'd like." He declared.

"As a matter of fact, I do prefer 'finder's fee' as it's far more accurate, even if removed a few more years than that typically implies," Rosalyn said. "But since I was thinking fifteen percent, we could save the dickering and settle on twelve and a half, because thirteen's liable to be unlucky."

'Well, I would only have offered you fifteen if you had given me the bonds by tomorrow, since it'd still be in this fiscal year. A recovery like that would improve our profit line immensely, and I'd be bonused quite nicely. So, I guess the twelve and a half would do. But I'd need the bonds before Columbus Day. After that it's back to ten." He sounded very proud of himself.

Lowry pined, "You mean I really could have gotten a fifteen per cent finder's fee if I only could have gotten them to you before tomorrow?"

"That's right. Fifteen percent before end of business tomorrow." he gloated.

"Still?" she asked, looking frantically around for a clock and seeing one on the wall.

"Why sure, honey," he chortled.

And in honor of Rosalyn's affinity for book reading, Danny imagined he could hear the flies buzzing in and out of this greedy pig's head, impaled high on a stake in a forest clearing on a no-longer-deserted island. His 'honey' had sealed the deal.

She squared off with the bank director, who had taken this all with a sense of horror and helplessness. He wanted all these people out of his bank. He could see the headlines and hoped he could keep his job. "Sir, would you be kind enough to help me?" And with that she reached down the front of her blouse, to his shock and embarrassment, and withdrew a long key on a necklace chain.

"I believe you have the other one for box 711. Would you take yours while I give mine to Officer Frances to use. I know it's not bank policy usually. But I think it would be best if she carried the drawer from that deposit box down here, set it on the desk, and only then opened it—for all to witness."

With that, she handed Frances her key and sat back down in her chair next to Danny Hart. She asked him, "Round numbers, Mr. Hart. Fifteen percent of each million in bonds is a one hundred- and fifty-thousand-dollar finder's fee, isn't it?"

"That would be correct, Mrs. Lowry," was his amused reply. He saw the drawn, pale look on the once-jolly insurance man's face.

"Would you be able to provide a lady with an escort back to her home, Mr. Hart? I have a barbecue to attend this evening and I would really like to see if my daughter would be able to accompany me." She was tired, and her nerves were frayed, but Roz Young Lowry refused to show it.

Danny said he could give her the ride, only if they left within the next half hour. He had another appointment in the later afternoon. And if they couldn't leave that soon, he said maybe he could get her to the nearby train station and the school van could get her the rest of the way.

It was a large metal fireproof box that Officer Frances hefted onto the desk. It only had a curled and crimped latch on its lid. The keys had been needed for the deposit box door only. She handed Rosalyn her key and

necklace. Rosalyn took the key off her necklace, gave it back to Frances for safekeeping, and asked the policewoman to do the honors.

The box was filled almost to the lid with paper-banded stacks of bearer bonds. Atop the bonds was a receipt for opening the box, in the name of Roz Young. The receipt showed the DATE REQUESTED was the first banking day after the robbery. The DATE OPENED was one banking day later. The bonds on the desk were those that wouldn't fit in the deposit box. The director would find upon review in the next few days that the annual box rental fee was always paid three banking days prior to the month and day the account was opened, by wire transfer from an account in the name of Roz Young.

Rosalyn made arrangements with the police captain and the bank director to see to the bonds. She did not want to interfere with the legal and financial considerations she knew each would have with the returned bonds, which still needed to be kept secure and protected.

As they got ready to leave for HAPPYDALE, she thanked Officer Frances for her assistance with the bonds. She saw Maura Hammersmith was quietly biding her time in a corner of the lobby, amidst all the buzz about the latest news among patrons and tellers, and the few reporters who were beginning to funnel in.

Rosalyn approached her and said, "I want to thank you for attending to Myles and putting that creep of a doctor in jail. Maybe you could let me know when Linda can come and see her dad, if that's not asking too much." She didn't wait for an answer, because she could tell the policewoman was not particularly disposed to think well of her.

354

It was difficult for Quatrane and Costa and, particularly, Soro to watch the hands of the clock crawl toward four in the afternoon. The executive meeting room was set up as it had been the week before when Mellon simply sent a messenger for the audit report, foregoing the in-person dickering and bartering they expected from him.

Karidja sat at the desk, situated in Hegerman's former office for the time being. She reviewed the regiment of document folders aligned in dress parade in front of her. She was going to need some, or all, of these today. And some would be marshaled against Mellon and company again, at a future custody hearing.

What had begun as two separate genetic strands evolved over two generations into a septic gene pool Soro hoped to cleanse with her research and organization of the facts, as best as she could reconstruct them. She was trained and had dedicated herself to crafting resolutions with facts such as these.

The primary and thickest folder on her desk held documents that narrated the saga of a fraudulent stock transaction and corporate acquisition. It was replete with copies of legal and pseudo-legal contracts and agreements and stipulations. There were eyewitness statements and first-hand accounts of activities that instigated and activated that fraud, and others that verified procedures and practices to perpetrate and conceal its existence. Karidja had solicited and received the help of investigators who had collected evidence from coast-to-coast.

The thinnest document folder was her brief to prove Ned Hegerman's wife accepted funds she placed in a Trust. That she, and only she, managed the trust until her death. And that the terms of the Trust transferred them to an independent, blind, third party, to the exclusion of her husband's control or influence.

A folder of eyewitness accounts, containing a dozen or so more sheets of paper, documented the story of a contract between two women at the onset of what neither could have then imagined would be their unhappy lives after university studies.

There was a manilla jacket with medical reports of a deceased older man. It lacked the customary and expected last will and testament, an advance directive in the event of incapacitation, and considerations for the ultimate handling of his remains or ritual celebration of his life or beliefs.

Court summation papers for past divorce and associated child custody considerations, rank ordered with the newest on top and oldest on the bottom, packed a folder of the average size of those on hand.

Police reports and crime scene photos made yet another document file somewhat less flat than the others, as it took its position in row and column.

A legal width folder, required to house copies of hospital x-ray film, was incomplete and set aside as a dimensional outlier. The man, whose interior and exterior, shown partially as a shadow and partially of more substance, depending on which of the images overlaid the another, still lay in a pray-and-see condition in a Long Island hospital.

Soro heard Gabriella enter and the squeaky wheels of the portable file cart. Costa told Soro, "Front to back, as you need or want them, hand me a folder at a time and I'll hang them from the top side rails. Then they'll be ready to roll into the conference room for four o'clock."

Karidja agreed thankfully. She was wearied by their contents and needed to clear her mind and soul of these accumulations of human failings and heartache before four o'clock, so she could be fair to everyone, even to those she wished personally not to be. She told Gaby, "Let's start with the back and work forward, please." And so that was the way they suspended the files.

355

With LeClerc incarcerated, the judgment was made that April Smith was no longer in danger of his retribution. The District Attorney's office suspended the county safe house use, to become effective at two-thirty in the afternoon.

Maura and Frances, in uniform, were dispatched in an unmarked vehicle to carry out the cancellation order. April was happy to see them as they entered the house from the now-fully-occupied two car garage. They sat together and April was informed completely about how the doctor was apprehended, arraigned and jailed. April was unclear why the county policewoman on detail came out of her bedroom saying, "Well, ladies, it's been nice. But I'm glad to be getting back to normal. She carried her night bag with her as she went toward the garage door.

April said, "Where is she going? Are you guys taking over again? I thought county was here until Wednesday."

Maura explained, "The DA's office says we are to disengage from this location. They are reassigning their guard detail. No one there feels anyone other than LeClerc posed a threat to your safety, which exists no longer with him behind bars for the foreseeable future. He did not make bail and he is unlikely to do so on appeal."

"What does that mean for me? What happens to me now?" she asked them nervously.

"We have been dispatched to explain this to you and to make sure our use of the property is properly terminated. There will be a cleaning and laundering crew arriving about three o'clock. The place will be ready by five o'clock for any other needs the county police or the district attorney have," said Maura.

"You both know, that's not all that I mean." April left the statement open-ended to see where they took it, in case it was elsewhere than where she wanted. If they did, she would learn more about her future. She could come back to her own questions after that.

"We are supposed to drive you home, or anywhere locally you want," said Frances.

"Supposed to?" asked April.

"Let's say our captain gave us a vague command in order to allow some latitude," hinted Frances.

"Does that latitude include longitude?" she asked laughingly, but half seriously.

"We should stay in jurisdiction, but case-related sites might qualify," was the answer Frances provided.

"So, you're saying you could bring me to the hospital to visit Mr. Lowry before you bring me home, or elsewhere?" she posed.

Frances looked to Maura, who technically had seniority. Maura offered, "That would seem reasonable to me."

"I'll ask you more in the car, then," said April, "and maybe even more than that after I see Myles. Is that fair?"

"Eminently so," replied Frances before Maura had to answer.

The policewomen asked her to lie down on the back seat when they opened the garage door, and to stay there for two blocks of driving. Maura clarified, "So the immediate neighbors see two people going in and two people coming out. No one will start trying to find out why you were a guest and who you are. Like you, we'd like that not to be known."

When Frances told her it was okay to sit up, April did so and started asking Maura questions in rapid succession. "Am I still a material witness? Do I have to stay in town? I did everything you asked, do I have immunity around the car crash and Myles being in the clinic? Are you now done with me and I'm on my own? Is the DA right about me being safe from retribution by LeClerc? Does that mean physically only? What about legally? Can his lawyer haul me into court to blame and get him off?"

Hammersmith began to answer, even though she needed to concentrate on driving them to the hospital. "Some of your answers are in our domain, some in the county DA's. Let me give you an idea from our captain's point of view. Would that be okay, April?"

"For starters, I guess it will have to do," the young woman conceded.

The policewomen exchanged side glances, that April certainly noticed, perched as she was on the front edge of the back seat and sitting in the middle of the car like a kid wanting to know 'are we there yet?'

Her litany of answers began as they rolled down the road at normal residential speed. Hammersmith kept mindful they were not in a car clearly identifiable from a distance as a police vehicle. "To make our case against LeClerc at trial, you will be our essential material witness, for sure. But since the trial may not be for almost a year, our captain will probably find it suitable for you to keep in touch with us, if you leave town and relocate, as long as you come back for the trial."

She addressed the next round of concerns April voiced. "My captain vouched for your complete and voluntary cooperation, and then some, that led to the arrest of the suspect-prisoner. All the statements we have taken affirm that you were not abetting LeClerc in the commission of a crime, and had no knowledge of his motives or intent. The captain told the prosecutor that your care for Myles was compassionate under Oulette and not conspiratorial beside Denison. All that suggests immunity is intact."

April raised her hand and extended it into the front seat between them, not threateningly. She exclaimed, "Suggests?"

"Immunity was extended through our stationhouse, but it originated in the DA's office. So only he would be able to confirm that your immunity still remains." She related.

April said elliptically, "Not thrilled with that."

"If it turns out you have to stay in town, of choose to do so, the police force will go to bat with you to see that the library and the luncheonette give you your jobs back," declared Maura.

April turned her attention, and her voice, up at that. "Wait. I got fired?" She was looking back and forth, and out the side windows of the car at the parts of town that were going by. "How could that be? I didn't do anything. You just said so!"

"The supermarket tabloids were not very kind in covering this story this week, April," said Maura tonelessly.

"How? In what ways?" she was very upset. "Stop and get me a copy to read."

Maura didn't stop the car. "All sold out. Like hotcakes."

"Well, at least tell me what they said. Please. C'mon, don't leave me hanging," she begged them.

Frances complied and took on the unpleasant task so Maura could figure a longer route to get to the hospital. "One sensationalizing journal from out of town reported its staffers and local tipsters tore apart LeClerc's

finances. Connected him to that bank heist in town years ago. Multiple articles, with pictures of the clinic and the railroad plaza, accused him of hurting a mentally handicapped local guy he duped to grab the money for him. Paper made this fall guy out to be sort of a favorite son. And claimed it was recounting rumors that a high-school-aged girl helped with his getaway, years ago. Said it was investigating, and would follow up next week, if that same person, now a grown woman, conspired with the doc to try and kill the man in the car crash. And they ran pictures of the library and hotel, April."

"And that accomplice is supposed to be me? Because I helped Myles in the library and after the crash? What garbage." She was livid.

"Who's standing up for me in all this? Are you and that DA?" she pleaded.

"Yellow rags won't talk to us. Captain sent out a press release saying a reliable material witness was invaluable in securing LeClerc's capture and arrest. But as a material witness he couldn't reveal your name. He's hoping some reporter will dig it out and print it. But until then, your employers have acted very unfairly under pressure from the community. I'm sorry, I don't know what to say," admitted Frances.

"What a load of crap. What a bunch of hypocrites. If they're making Petey out to be a favorite son, they're a pack of liars. Myles had nightmares about kids just old enough to be allowed to cross the street on their bikes mercilessly taunting that poor man. His life was a hell." She started to weep. "What's happened to this town? Were those the reporters we fled from my home to avoid, Maura?"

When neither policewoman replied, April knew she had her answer. She saw out the windows of the car that they were entering the back lot of the hospital by the emergency ambulance entrance. The car came to a stop, but before anyone got out, April said some of the last words she addressed to these women, in whom she had now lost confidence. "I'll tell you what's a crime. It's a crime that people get told stories when they are young and then are encouraged to read and write, only to get jobs to write stories like this in books and newspapers for adults who readily believe what they read."
She checked out the back seat and took all her belongings with her.

Uncontested because of their uniforms, they walked right through the emergency entrance and into the elevator accessing the ward where Myles was being examined by Françoise Oulette. When they stepped onto the floor and saw Oulette down the hall, Frances said to April, "Ask Oulette about her plans for France." Then she held back a moment and placed her extended arm, palm facing Oulette's end of the corridor, to make sure Maura did the same.

Hammersmith told her in a hospital-appropriate hushed voice, as they walked slowly down the hall. "Thanks, partner. I just didn't have the heart to tell her."

"Partners now? Is that what the Lowrys have made us?" And after a moment, "I didn't have the heart not to." And then, "But I'll tell you, partner, that was worse than any front step notification I've ever made to a woman who did not know yet she was a widow."

They had reached the doctor and April standing together. Maura asked, "How's the patient, today?"

Dr. Oulette informed them, "He is improving. All his monitored functions are within normal, or at least acceptable, ranges. He is reacting physically to stimuli applied to his extremities, on both right and left sides, soles of the feet and palms of the hands. Very encouraging. I will be much relieved when his care is transferred."

There was a slight surprise in Maura's voice, 'He's being transferred out of the hospital?" she asked.

Oulette replied, "Oh, no, no. He'll be here for some time yet before he goes to a rehabilitation clinic."

"Then—" Hammersmith's question did not need to be asked.

"It is me who is transferring. After my exam this morning, I will now write a report and transfer Mr. Lowry's care over to the hospital." She explained. "He has passed the critical milestones I was attending and monitoring."

Frances inquired, "How is your grandfather this morning, doctor."

"Thank you for asking. He is a very happy man," she replied.

They both left it at that. The policewomen shook the doctor's hand and thanked her for everything. Maura asked, "April, where would you like us to take you?"

"You already have, thank you. Dr. Oulette has invited me to breakfast. She will take me home after that. I took everything I had from the car. I'm all set." Only over breakfast downstairs in the hospital cafeteria would April's hands start to tremble as the last of her anger drained from them. If they stopped shaking when she got back home, she would try her hand at writing a more polite letter of appreciation to their captain, and one each to the officers who had protected her when they thought she was in danger.

The elevator door closed on the officers facing them from the end of the floor. The doctor asked April, "Would you like to look in on Mr. Lowry, April?" She guided her 'able assistant' in to see her one-time solarium roommate. This room was very different from their much larger sunroom. Here the focus was on a bed-ridden stroke victim and not a mobile, concussed patient. And so was April's, as she ignored all the equipment and messages on wall whiteboards.

He laid there, still, on his back, propped slightly by the mechanical bed and partially by strategically arranged individual pillows, that loosely immobilized side-to-side head movement. April was happy and hopeful when she saw that the side of his face drooped less than on the day of his stroke. His arms and hands were atop the unwrinkled white sheet, straight at his sides. April asked the doctor, "May I hold his hand?" Oulette nodded.

She nudge-slid her left hand under his palm and placed her right atop the back of his hand. It was warm to the touch. Her fingertips felt the pulse in his downward facing wrist. It did not leap or pause at her touch. She hoped he would sense her there and open his eyes and tell her what he had been dreaming these past two days. She stood, emptied out by this second major disappointment of the morning. Afraid to hurt him, she did not squeeze his hand, but did press down on each of hers to convey her parting embrace. She leaned in and kissed him on his forehead, then turned to Oulette to show she was ready to leave.

Over a simple breakfast of juice, eggs, and a slice of panini bread, that April poured and ladled and toasted at preference from a hot breakfast buffet, the doctor and her helper talked at length. By mutual consent, the discussion did not linger on Myles Lowry or post-stroke regimens or acute psychological, physical, or occupational rehab hopefully in his future. Their chatting was triggered by April's statement, "Officer Frances said I should ask you about your plans for France."

Françoise Oulette confided in April that, "My association with Dr. LeClerc and my treatment of Myles Lowry have placed me in a very uncomfortable and intractable position. I have resigned my position in the psychological services practice, effective immediately. Doing so will make any review board hearings or licensure revocations unnecessary."

April's audible huff made the doctor pause. "At least you didn't get fired," she offered as consolation.

"Oh, I would have been. I've been ostracized since colleagues have seen or read the news," Françoise told her.

"What are you going to do?" April said.

"What Officer Frances alluded to actually." She waited purposefully until April set down her fork and provided her undivided attention.

When Oulette knew April was ready to hear it, she began to tell her about her grandfather. "Wait a minute," said April, at one point. She went to the buffet and filled a large take-out container with black coffee, left the lid, and picked up a chocolate chip muffin.

When she was back at their table, April said, "Now I'm ready for what sounds like a long story."

Oulette smiled at the immediacy of youth. And it gave her an idea that colored how she decided to tell her story about the past in France, which she recalled was of little interest to the policewomen; and the dreamed-about sanitorium of the future in Ault. She finished by saying, "The only thing my grandfather doesn't realize is that I need someone to help me whom I can trust, and with whom I know in advance I can work."

"Wait. You're going?" said April excitedly. "I mean . . . to France?"

"Yes. Ironically it appears Doctor LeClerc has moved that decision along."

"From what you say about an assistant, though, there must be others there who could do that for you," said April, trying to be encouraging, but not yet hearing what Françoise was saying.

"April?" The doctor fixed on her eyes. "The assistant I need is not someone who will *do* something. It will be a person who will *be* someone."

"You're making me nervous, Doctor," April said.

"April. Please do not be mistaken. This is a job offer, not a mating ritual," Françoise laughed. "This foundation has two hard years ahead, of funding raising, data managing, and historical researching of architecture for sanitoria—inside and out. My grandfather's vision is of a futuristic medical facility housed in a traditional medieval edifice. But he is missing the link, figuratively and literally. He does not see that he is without a computer savvy, modern woman to attract people her age, and who can convince widows and mothers and sisters to value the caring such a place my grandfather desires to leave as a legacy to his beloved hometown and homeland."

April says, "Seems like a suitable recompense for my helping megalomaniac LeClerc at his clinic," she said smugly before breaking off a piece of muffin to chew on, along with the idea of going to France. With a wash down of coffee she asked, "When do we leave?"

Oulette was overjoyed and more hopeful for her grandfather's legacy than she had been when she handed in her letter of resignation the evening before. "I have very little to hold me here. I can have my affairs in order by this weekend. My patients have already been reassigned and I can't see them anyway. Everything else I can handle from overseas through intermediaries."

April told her, "I'm on a month-to-month with the landlord, in his furnished apartment. Since I'll never see the money coming to me from LeClerc, it's just as well. I can't make Thursday's rent anyway. He's been nice, I wouldn't want to stiff him. He'll welcome the lack of attention by the press

and the morbid hangers-on they report to. He can use the security deposit to throw out my stuff I don't want, and get the place cleaned. He'll break even."

She went on to her personals. "I could walk out the door after packing my one suitcase, which I might not even be able to fill, and my backpack. That would leave just my bicycle. And I know what I'm going to do with that," she smirked.

Oulette said, "Let's look in on Myles one last time, as non-visitors. Then I'll drive you to your place. I'll come back for you later and you can stay with me—I've got an extra room—until we leave for Ault."

"But Doctor Oulette, I don't have that kind of money," said April, meaning for the transatlantic flight.

The doctor replied, "I suppose it will take you time, but we should use our first names; after all, that's why they are called 'given.'" She waited for April's shrug of agreement, and then said, "We haven't discussed your salary yet, April, so you have no idea what kind of money you'll have."

They went and did what they said they would. April arranged for Françoise to pick her up in the library parking lot that evening—suitcase, backpack, and all—right where she left her bicycle, upright in a bike rack, unlocked and free of all restraint.

356

Danny Hart came into the steno pool office and greeted Eleanor Quatrane and Gabriella Costa. Karidja Soro was off elsewhere. "Dan, you got back here fast," said Costa.

"I didn't drive Mrs. Lowry all the way back to the school. There wasn't enough time; we left the bank later than desired. She called ahead for the school van to get her at the railroad station."

Eleanor said, "We have a few catch-ups with you, Danny; just as you do with us. We should prioritize in case any of them effect the four o'clock

meeting with Mellon. Gaby helped Karidja prepare the file cart to bring to the conference room a while ago. I'll intercom over and see if she can join us."

Quietly, so as not to interfere with that call, Gaby asked him, "Dan, how was spending all that time with Rosalyn?"

"When I was in high school, I hung out with a pair of twins . . . guys," he said. She looked at him and sat on the corner of her desk, realizing she was in for what she called 'a Hart special.' He mused aloud for her benefit. "They were fraternal . . . different from one another . . . teachers couldn't tell them apart at the beginning of a new school year . . . parents saw to it they were in the same classes. One was basketball and baseball . . . the other football and lacrosse . . . one meat and potatoes . . . the other couldn't resist seafood and spaghetti."

"And the point, please, Dan? Because here comes Karidja."

"The whole time I was with Rosalyn Lowry, it was like hanging with my kid friends . . . but only if they were paternal twins," he said.

"What?" she stammered, as Karidja came in.

"Paternal . . . you know two different dads. Real creepy." He turned away from flummoxing Gabs, and said hello to the lawyer.

"Eleanor says to share pertinent three-minute recaps from today and yesterday to help us at four o'clock. Danny?"

Hart spoke up, "My days were long and, way too complicated, for three minutes, so highlights only from me and only new intel, no rehash." He rifled away, trying to honor Dom's narrative style, "1972: Heading back to Barnard, Roz Young sidetracks to jump Dennis Clark's bones for cash and a joint in his car in her hometown railroad parking lot. Along lopes the local village—excuse the expression—retard, totting two backpacks he gets scared into dropping and he runs away. Clark grabs them and tosses them into his back seat. Amidst the continuing hot and heavy up front, they get interrupted and spooked. Roz grabs what she thinks is her schoolbag and flees, boarding a train to Manhattan. Clark leaves home, becomes Denison LeClerc, finances his medical education and an oncology practice with laundered bearer bonds."

"Flash ahead to 1992: Turns out those bags are from a bank heist, unsolved until this morning. Rosalyn Lowry hunts around to test the value of laundered bearer bonds. Gets scared off by LeClerc's arrest. Calls her favorite private investigator to broker a deal before she's Fed-meat-on-ice. Turns out she put the bonds back into a safety deposit box she opened in the plundered bank two days after the robbery. And there they sat. This morning, she takes the investigator with her to leverage local law enforcement against the bank and the insurer and the Feds—and twists their shorts big time to agree to a voluntary return of 'found' bonds, no punishment . . . and screws the arrogant insurer out of a fifteen percent finder's fee."

He concluded, "Attorney Soro, Mellon's representing one jailbird in Aello and one free-as-a-bird Lowry in half an hour. And it looks like the new daughter of the wind has opened her bonds bag, blown the Harpy away, and fashioned out of her uncustomary patience a windfall of between one and two hundred thousand dollars."

Eleanor put in her two cents, heavily discounted. "This is one rich bitch—and that may not be the half of it." She pointed across the work area and called out, "Gaby."

"I heard back this morning from Pittsburgh. Several months ago, Marie Aello was notified by the state bar that she would have to stand for proceedings looking into legal conduct. I was told those hearings might have led to being disbarred in the state. She could file what the state terms 'voluntary cessation of practice until further notice' to avoid all actions, license revocation, or disbarment. No one has heard from her since."
Costa concluded, "Aello most likely came back here looking for money to get started again. Thus, her hunt for the AP, Karidja; before Ned's heart attack."

"Attorney Soro," cut in Danny, now talking Hart-style and not Corredor-lingo. "I have something else new that may play more into your custody hearing than today's audit challenge." The three ladies urged him on, 'but quickly,' said Gabs. "She did not explain what or why, but in the bank today, to fight off the Feds accusing her of money-laundering, Lowry claimed she only started looking into black market exchange rates a few months ago, after her daughter was 'imperiled.'" He wondered aloud if that was about when Aello came back from Pittsburgh, "to hunt for the AP, as Gabs just said."

And Gabriella took the floor back right away, her three minutes not up yet. "There was a veiled hint that Aello's legal troubles involved claims made by a fertility clinic. But no details on that."

"Those are all very helpful. Thank you all," Karidja said. "I should go to the conference room to be ready in advance." She left very pensive and enveloped by her thoughts. In a minute or two afterwards Eleanor followed.

357

It was a little after class was out for the shortened day, and before Rosalyn arrived home on the HAPPYDALE van. Alex answered the door and she and Linda saw Clementine and her mother standing on their front step.

"We wanted to come by and see how Linda was feeling," her mother said, as Red squeezed by both adults to stand next to Linda. They went inside to Linda's room, where they drove her train in and out from under her bed and had a wonderful time. Linda was still resting up after the early afternoon walk, her second of that day.

"They told me you figured out my caboose clue." Linda said.

"It was a good clue. I was sorry it took so long to make them do something about it. Adults always believe the kids that hide what they do wrong, so it doesn't show," said Red.

"But I heard you finally made sure they knew she was telling a lie," the train engineer announced. "Did that feel good."

Red said, "It felt good to make them listen and start looking for you. But it really felt good to see her bleeding and crying. I beat her in the game world of Insecta and in the real world of HAPPYDALE." She laughed and took her turn driving the train. "And that police lady made sure my mother and me did not get in trouble with the school. That was the BEST!" she shouted.

Red's mother and Miss Alex came to the bedroom door at the shout. "No excitement, little lady," reminded Alex. "Or you won't be able to see Red and your other friends at the picnic later."

Linda told Alex and Clementine's mother. "Other than Red, I don't have any real kid friends here. Just children of adults my mother knows."

358

The clock on the wall was at ten after four. The far end of the table prepared to receive Mellon and associates, minus Aello, was empty. Perhaps they were still trying to communicate from the visitor's room at the jail, thought Thomas Bruce. Karidja Soro was making marginal notes on some printed sheets—unnecessary, mindless work to appear occupied. Eleanor Quatrane paged through the audit report to appear to be attentive to the matters at hand. Next to Bruce, his administrative assistant, Gladys, was doodling on her steno pad. She was immune to his petulance, because despite his public disregard for her importance, without her he would be lost; and they both knew that all too well. Next to her were two of the firm's accountants who had already delved into this matter over several night and weekend sessions.

The outsider, Danny Hart, sat stoically with his arms folded and no diversions on the table in front of him. Thousands of hours of stake outs had given the investigator plenty of practice in how to wait for something to happen. He was Bruce's straw man, who could be readily excused if Mellon objected. But Hart could just as well be the managing partner's proxy bargaining chip for his friend Mike Riley, if Bruce wanted to challenge a felon's ability to inherit Ned's assets set forth in the audit. Since the Trust was not included, it would be a weak ploy, but it could distract Mellon, just the same.

But by four-twenty-nine, when they had not seen nor heard from the imprisoned heir, her lawyer, or other representatives, Thomas Bruce pushed his chair back from the table and was ready to dismiss the group. As he cleared his throat, the conference room speaker phone device in the middle of the table sounded. Gladys reached for the instrument and answered it. In a jousting of the two seconds, Miss Hayes's voice filled the room, with no regret or diminishment. "Good afternoon, Gladys. I believe we have talked before. This is Mr. Mellon's administrative assistant." She did not give her name, a gauntlet slap in the face to Bruce's left-hand woman.

Gladys knew how to do her job, running her metal-tipped wooden lance at Hayes's breastplate. "Are the men going to speak, or has Godfrey decided he is above doing so . . . again?"

"Attorney Mellon regrets that in his client's inexcusable absence, there is nothing for him to communicate except his respect for Mr. Bruce's valuable time, and that he has asked me to convey that he accepts the audit from last week at this time on her behalf."

Thomas Bruce spoke for the record, to prove his presence and the half hour, billable, delay in the proceedings. "Good afternoon, ma'am. This is Attorney Thomas Bruce, Managing Partner. May I ask you please to confer with Godfrey about whether he agrees to use Wednesday's quarter-ending September 30 evaluations for the settlements?"

"No need to have you wait. The question was anticipated. End of the month assessment of asset values is welcome and acceptable," she replied somewhat officiously. "Will there be anything else, sir? Gladys?"

Both parties terminated the call to make certain neither was on record about there being nothing else. These two law firms seemed well rehearsed in claiming technical difficulties apparently ended a session before the item they wanted revisited in the future could have been addressed.

Bruce waited to make certain the phone connection was broken before addressing the group around the table. When Gladys nodded and ran her hand across her throat to signal it was dead, he began. He told the two accountants, "I want you to begin the liquidation of Ned Hegerman's audited assets. Mr. Mellon is to receive them for distribution to Aello, as he sees fit, no later than Columbus Day."

"Ms. Soro, please give me a report by the end of the month concerning the projected status of the custody case you have been continuing for Attorney Hegerman. Don't hesitate to contact the judge if need be. The directors will review that case on the first Friday of October to see if it will be reassigned to another firm, or continued on our calendars in the new fiscal year."

He stood and without a word of thanks for all that the people assembled had done to protect the firm by Mellon's cudgeling, he left the room with no further comment.

Gladys followed behind, having been forewarned that a busy night would lie ahead.

359

To most HAPPYDALE residents and school community members, Administrator Grey's Free Ultimate Surprise Barbecue Dinner was a great way to celebrate and appreciate teachers and staff. Even old timers could not recall this massive an outlay of food and drink and games and of fun times on the quads during the school year. The quad was swarming with resident and day students, their parents and siblings, girls and boys, the latter a rare sight at the school.

Hardly anyone stayed at home for dinner. All took part in the ribs and burgers, dogs and chicken, corn on the cob and toasted buns, cooked over coals on the lengthwise bisected 55-gallon drums and brought to serving stations on silver trays. Salads of macaroni and potatoes and slaws and chafing dishes of baked beans and platter after platter of various chips adorned long white tables next to punch bowls, pitchers of iced tea, and pyramids of soda cans, urns of coffee and hot water for tea. Halfway through the three hours, the caterer added cold trays mounded with ice cream flavor after ice cream flavor, with toppings to make personalized sundaes. Pies, cakes, and cookies rounded out the desserts.

Red kept looking for Linda in the ever-moving crowd, but their mothers had cautioned she might come for just the last half hour or so, for dinner and then have to go home for the night. When she finally saw Linda, her friend was awash in tears. She and her mother split up so Mrs. Lowry could go to the drink table while her daughter headed over to get a hot dog with kraut and mustard. Linda had set her plate down on the condiment station bench and was holding her hot dog under the pump dispenser for mustard. Some boy she did not recognize cut in front of her, redirected the nozzle and jammed down the plunger very hard three times. The yellow ooze

jetted out all over Linda's favorite shirt. The boy did not apologize; he just ran away.

Linda thought he must have been somebody's older brother. He looked like he was in fifth of sixth grade. She was upset and went to sit down at the table where her mother told her to wait. A different boy, who looked to Linda to be about nine or ten years old, was walking by very deliberately. He had a red plastic drink cup in one hand and was balancing a droopy paper plate in the other. His pile of French fries looked like a fallen Jenga tower, with a huge moat of ketchup surrounding it. He sneakily slid the paper plate onto the seat of the chair so Linda could not help but sit on it. Her white shorts were drenched with the red mess. Older kids pointed at her pants and said nasty words while laughing at her and circling around the end of the table. The ring of hecklers blocked Rosalyn's view, so she turned around and headed back to the hot dog line to look for her girl.

Red caught up to Linda running toward home, wet in the face, yellow in the shirt and red in the pants. When they were close to the front door, the girls stopped when someone whistled to them. They turned around saw Deirdre hanging out between two cars they had just run past. The same two older boys flanked her on each side. When they knew they had been seen, they turned and smugly walked back to get some ice cream.

Clementine stayed with Linda and waited at her doorstep. They heard some music and a voice over a microphone. They thought it sounded like Ms. Grey. Rosalyn heard the same voice and stopped to look over toward the middle of the quad, where the administrator was standing. She looked for Linda, hoping for an announcement to say a child was lost and could the parent please come to the microphone stand. But that was not to be the case this time. Rather than her daughter standing next to the administrator it was the woman from the singles bar, outfitted in her white catering garb, with the stylized script letter 'Y" logo on the front. Rosalyn worked her way to the front of the crowd, just twenty feet from Grey.

> "And I'd like to conclude by saying a big 'thank you' to my friend Yvonne and her hard-working cooks and servers for this tremendous show of appreciation for our teachers and staff."

"Let's all give them a great round of applause
for the gang from Yvonne's."

The cooks and servers all paraded out from the grills and from behind the buffet tables. They had their arms raised in thanks and were clapping their high extended hands. Many came up to Yvonne and gave her hugs and kisses. Most were still employed at the restaurant even though Yvonne had sold it and retired. Their circle of affirmation moved Yvonne closer to Beatriz. At the peak of the excitement, Yvonne turned to Beatriz and gave her a hug. Rosalyn was looking at them both. They stared purposefully right back at her. And then Yvonne stepped back in and with her hands on the Administrator's cheeks, she gave her a very long passionate kiss right on the lips.

One of the servers took the microphone from Beatriz and called out to the crowd, "Let's give them a big round of applause"—pointing the crowd's attention directly at the two women still engaged in their kiss. Just as her former boss had told her she wanted done as the night's finale.

Clementine tugged at Rosalyn's shirt. Thinking Red was lost, she looked down and asked, "Where's your mother, honey?"

"On your front stoop. She's with Linda. The door is locked. We can't get her inside. You have to come right away." The red-head insisted.

"Is everything okay?" Lowry demanded.

"No," was all Red had to say to tear Rosalyn away from the quad scene that had disturbed her so.

Rosalyn was torn.

She was furious about how her daughter looked, streaked by a guerilla food fight that she never declared and that was never waged fairly.

She was impatient with having to thank a classmate and her mother, who then accused her implicitly for these troubles and declared, "My daughter is not to come to your library to play that Insecta game with Deirdre, ever again."

She was upset that she had laundry to do, and a child to bathe, and a floor to clean along the path to get her to the bathroom.

Yet, under all that was the tantrum surge she felt coming on, as a result of losing the leverage she had on Grey about her closet relationship. But a resentful after-picnic gnat, that struggled in the mucus and tears and dripping condiments oozing from her daughter, pestered at Rosalyn to scratch the itch of that ugly green bug of jealousy gripping her just as she felt Red's summoning grasp out on the quad.

Linda stood in the shower as her mother directed. She sobbed as her mom used the shower wand to rinse off the clothes she still wore, except for the sneakers she slipped off at the front door mat. Through her tears and the shower water cascading from her hair, Linda saw the river of red and yellow streaking to the floor of the tub, and then swirling around the drain, fighting to survive. She tried to ask her mother, through her nose sniffs and heaving chest, "Why did we have to come here? I liked my old school. I liked our house by the trains. I thought you liked Annie and her dad. Why can't we go back there, mom? I want to go back. There are no bullies there."

Linda went to bed with only slightly damp hair, but with sore eyes and reddened cheeks. She was not supposed to have this much excitement. That's what the hospital nurse said. It was on those papers. That's why she would be home from school again tomorrow—which she did not mind at all, just then. She would ask Miss Alex tomorrow why people are so mean. She would ask to take a walk to the caboose. It would not take an hour to go there and back while everyone else was in class. And then gradually, as she was thinking about the caboose, and how she would show Miss Alex all the cabinets and the front and back porch—but not the attic compartment—she gave in to sleep.

360

While throwing Linda's stained clothing, and her own soiled shirt, into the washing machine, it wasn't Annie Wilkes she thought about, but another Stephen King heroine of hers, Carrie White. Perhaps it was Linda's white pants, stained with ketchup where she sat; or a public event at a school where two women stood prom-like, to be crowned with applause.

And that got her to thinking that Deirdre had somehow conscripted her classmates' older brothers to do her dirty work. It terrified her and electrified her, to realize that both these prepubescent girls witnessed the threat that boys and men presented, and the awareness that they could be manipulated so wantonly.

That would now become a theme in her first adult book club examination of Rumpelstiltskin the next morning, once she got Linda settled with Alex. She would probe the women assembled to see how men, like the king and the title character, had worked them to the bone for their skills and then tried to trick them out of their freedom of movement and empowerment as mothers.

Rosalyn checked on Linda again, who appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Taking her Philadelphia notebook, she began to review her research. She tore out the page with the phone number she was given for Kelly Rocco. It reminded her that Thursday was the first of October. She folded the paper and stuck it in her pocket, just in case.

Reading her notes about Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm did not do much to endear her to the male of the species and it served to increase the bad feelings the night had triggered.

In turn, that set the perfect stage for the ring of her phone at her elbow. She grabbed it quickly, so Linda was not awakened. The man's voice on the other end was startled she picked up. He said her name only. And her 'yes' reply was as short.

"This is Godfrey Mellon, Mrs. Lowry," he said. "I wonder if I might have a moment of your time?"

"I'll listen. If I don't like what I hear, I will hang up. I give you this fair warning to be polite. I would not care to appear discourteous to you, should our connection be terminated suddenly."

"Thank you for that consideration, Mrs. Lowry." He intoned without the sarcasm she would have expected.

She did not reply. She weighed whether to demand how he had her phone number. But she decided that could wait.

"Many things have happened over the last few days. Some may have an effect on your family, so I thought it best to call myself, without relying on intermediaries or the nightly news." She said nothing, but he could hear her breathing. So he continued and used her respiration to gauge her response.

"I'll start with some bad news and work toward better news and then good news. I hope that will be agreeable." He did not wait for a reply. "The bad news is that two people were indicted for crimes today. One is a cancer specialist and clinic owner on Long Island. He was jailed for stalking Myles and crashing into his rental car. He was not indicted for money laundering by the state and county, but that might occur shortly as a federal charge."

She did not explode at him for saying Myles's name. So, he would stay in that lane. It was probably as neutral emotionally as he could get, steering away from familial terms of identification.

"The second person arrested was Marie Aello, Ned Hegerman's daughter." Again, there was no audible gasp or expression of surprise. Mellon felt he was doing well so far. He had passed go and didn't look to see if he earned the two hundred dollars; he didn't end up being the one in jail. He still monopolized the call however, so he was still nervous things could change any minute. "She assaulted a neighbor of yours in your apartment block and his dog was killed." He thought he heard a slightly mouthed 'tsk' in memoriam for the dog.

"Neither of these people made bail. Their trials are far away in time. So, I was wondering if knowing that might change your mind about where you feel most at ease living—you and Linda, I mean, of course. Particularly, I wonder if you might consider returning to the apartment?" This time he waited in hopes that a longer pause might entice her to speak and give him an answer, or at least open a discussion on the topic.

Rosalyn re-heard in her mind Linda's sobbing inquisition in the shower, about the very same thing her ears were now hearing Mellon ask. He was almost ready to talk again, but her voice beat him to it, with a rational and unemotional inquiry, "Why would you ask me, us, to go back to live there, Mr. Mellon?"

"It happens, Mrs. Lowry, that I represented Ms. Aello in the matter of her inheritance, being that Attorney Hegerman passed away recently."

Mellon was unable to determine how much of what he was telling Rosalyn was new information or facts that she already knew. This call was reminding him of just how difficult a client she was to serve.

She spoke a one-word question. He was elated she was listening and not just tolerating him. "And . . .?"

"This afternoon, quite by coincidence, that inheritance matter was decided upon. Mr. Hegerman's former firm has to liquidate his assets and pay her their worth. It came to quite a lot of money. It will hurt their firm, which frankly, was precisely Ms. Aello's desire." That was what he promised himself, while sipping his scotch neat before he dialed her number, was all he was willing to tell her unless she engaged. He hoped he had enticed her and so he remained as silent as she had been, to see if that was going to occur.

It did. "Why do you feel these things might be of interest to me, Mr. Mellon? And what does it have to do with Linda and I moving back to the apartment? We are quite settled here now." She stopped at just those two Items.

The attorney employed the listening skills that served him well with hostile witnesses. She had decided not to use his given name, but she did project a willingness to respect his function as a lawyer—perhaps even still and again her lawyer, he hoped. It was the presumption he meant to project, confidently and competently, with no objections.

"In the flurry of activity and in light of her imprisonment, Ms. Aello sems to have been willing to settle her inheritance claim in a manner that, as they say, 'left money on the table.'" He paused. "Actually, quite a bit of money."

"And . . .?" she repeated her refrain.

"She hinted it might have something to do with you."

"I truly doubt that. If she is still the person she had become when last we met—so many years ago, to save you asking—I suggest you look at your notes. You must be careful around women like her who tease men, sir. She was making you salivate for a commission or fee in order to have you find out something she couldn't on her own."

It was the most she had said. Mellon recalled she was a literature teacher and Shakespeare's observation came to him that 'the lady doth protest too much.' He let that drop and went on.

"That certainly may be." He skipped a beat and shifted his vocal intent. "But, back to your moving if I might . . ." When she did not reply or end the call, he felt permitted to pursue the topic.

"I was hoping that a return to your apartment would signal a return to the hearings for Linda's custody." No reply.

"In addition to my thinking you had a very strong case to wrest away complete custody earlier, I now think that Linda's father's . . . untimely . . . medical emergency will further persuade Judge McCarver to grant it to you." Mellon kept going so she would not interrupt. If she hung up, so be it. He'd try again another time.

"Returning to your apartment would instill a renewed confidence in your providing Linda with a stable home environment. Should the judge need assurances, I think I could point to Ms. Aello's incarceration as your signal that returning is safe." He seemed pleased that he was pulling out the right stops, like that church's organist did at Hegerman's funeral. "And explain your initial departure to HAPPYDALE."

Rosalyn was listening even more carefully than Mellon had been. So far, she had learned two important facts. Godfrey was not fully aware of the nature or importance of the AP Aello wanted to steal. And he knew that Marie threatened Linda's life when she first arrived back from Pittsburgh, having learned what she did about her own maternity. If she kept him talking by remaining silent, she imagined she could learn even more.

When she didn't reply, he kept going. "And as far as safety is concerned, I've had a private investigator looking in on the apartment while you were away. I was originally concerned something terrible may have happened to you, so we were watching in case any perpetrators returned. I could keep her on retainer and have her perform well-being checks and give you her number. Her office is not far from the apartment. She could respond to your calls." Godfrey thought he was reeling her in.

"Her name?" Rosalyn asked him.

"Her name is Angie Flynn. She is licensed in the state, and she has a carry permit, in case your or Linda's safety needs protection before the police can arrive." He recited from memory of what Miss Hayes told him.

"So, she *was* telling the truth, then." reflected Mrs. Lowry aloud.

And that sent Mellon into a tailspin. Before he could recover, Rosalyn spoke calmly and politely—recalling her lessons from Officer Frances and Investigator Hart earlier at the bank. "You have given me many things to think about, Mr. Mellon. Perhaps we could talk again in a day or two, when I've had time to consider your offer." And as promised, she gently replaced the handset on its cradle and went in to check on Linda. She would ask him about the phone number the next time they talked, and he needed another nudge off whatever cliff on which he was perched.

Tuesday morning
September 29, 1992

361

At seven-thirty Tuesday morning, every computer screen in the law office, and all networked screens at employee homes, signaled an incoming electronic communication, received in most cases as an e-mail. It read:

> September 29, 1992
> Good morning.
>
> The Board of Directors and Senior Partners wish to commend Managing Partner Thomas Bruce for his astute handling of the assets left behind upon the sudden death of our associate, Ned Hegerman, a few weeks ago.
>
> Attorney Bruce has taken steps to reduce, by a significant amount, the monetized value of the assets partner emeritus Hegerman identified

as part of his ownership in the firm, by forcing a clarification and redefinition of his ownership status and asset verification.

Notwithstanding the extraction of value in what will be a lump sum payment, by Columbus Day, to Mr. Hegerman's heir, funded by a sell-off of assets, our firm, though much-diminished, will remain viable, with its Board of Directors and principal owners and its stellar reputation intact.

The Board will announce procedures to calculate, before Columbus Day, selective layoffs to absorb anticipated losses. Employees indicating by the end of the fiscal year, extended to end-of-business this Thursday, that they choose voluntarily to separate from the firm will be offered generous severance and enticement bonuses prior to the Board's layoff calculations. The voluntary departures will be effective also at the end-of-business this Thursday, October 1. Layoffs will inaugurate at the end-of-business on Friday, October 16.

President, Board of Directors

Danny Hart's phone rang at seven-thirty-five. Before he could even say his name, he heard Gabs, either out of breath or crying. He couldn't tell. His mind went immediately to Myles Lowry and Mike Riley.

"Dan. Can I forward you an e-mail to read? And then call me back." she said flatly.

"Sure. What's it about, Gabs?" he tried.

"Getting shitcanned," was all she had to say.

He told himself as he walked over to make sure his computer was on, "That didn't take long."

362

The second-to-last day of September at HAPPYDALE. was clear and sunny. Rosalyn got Alex and Linda settled at about the regular time for going to classes. The night before went undiscussed. That seemed odd to Alex, but Linda knew her mother would be this way. "We don't talk about things my mother doesn't want to talk about," she confided to Alex.

As before, when the dining hall breakfast eaters left for class, the mothers' coffee klatch was in full swing. The librarian came over and did not sit down. She wasn't holding a coffee. "I just came over to say hello and to remind you about our first book club session in the library at nine o clock. Hope to see you there. I have extra copies of the story if you left it home." Rosalyn did not ask Margie if she was coming, but Katie's mom held up her copy and waved it in the air.

363

As she walked into his Manhattan chambers, Attorney Karidja Soro expressed thanks for Judge Eoin McCarver's extraordinary generosity to see her on such short notice. Ten minutes short, to be exact.

"I have about fifteen minutes, Ms. Soro. My clerk, Ramona, says you have an urgent consideration concerning Linda Lowry and her parents. Please sit and let me hear it." He was still in his shirtsleeves and tie, having hung his jacket in his office closet but not yet having donned his judicial robes.

"Concerning reconvening the custody hearing, Your Honor, . . . there are developments I feel should be brought to your attention. These are several. Mrs. Lowry and Linda have been found, safe and sound."

"I am relieved to hear that, I assure you," he told her.

"They are living at a residential private school in northwestern New Jersey. They could be made readily available to the court. However, Mr.

Lowry has been injured and is just about making his way back to consciousness after a stroke. He is hospitalized on Long Island."

"I saw the report of that in the *Newsday*. But not that he was coming around. Is he competent to attend a hearing?"

"Unknown at this time, Your Honor. I am hoping to know that by noon today," she admitted.

"Then what is the urgency?" McCarver inquired.

"An intertwined case has long imperiled this hearing, Your Honor." She waited to see if he reacted. He did not. She knew she had to proceed very carefully. "We have reason to believe, that—"

"We?" he interjected.

"My legal team and our field investigators, Your Honor."

"Go on," he indicated, while tapping his watch with his right pointer finger.

"We have reason to believe that Mr. Lowry's attorney may have been under undue stress two years ago when the currently paused custody agreement was reached," she stated.

But before she could continue, the Judge said, "Attorney Soro, you are aware that agreement was reached in my court. Correct?"

"I am, Your Honor. And our concerns are not with the actual proceeding before your bench, Your Honor, but in the prior preparations and client consultations between Mr. Lowry and Attorney Hegerman," she explained.

"Are you prepared to detail those charges, Ms. Soro? You do recognize how quite serious they are. And with Mr. Hegerman no longer able to defend himself . . ." his voice trailed off.

"Your Honor, there are no charges to be filed. No accusations made to the court. I tell you these things for only one reason. The intertwined case to

which I referred is past history, but it spawned a third action between Mr. Hegerman's heir and our law firm. The action was settled only late yesterday and has not yet been filed nor reported upon. But it is significant that Godfrey Mellon is the attorney of record for that action—and it stripped our law firm of over a third of its assets, assigned as they were to Ned Hegerman's ownership," she realized she was losing him, and her battle against the clock. And she had so much further to go. Her overtime elephant mascot saw the goalie dig in his heels.

"And . . .?" said the judge. Neither knew he echoed Rosalyn's quizzing of Mellon the night before.

"In light of those financial loses, office politics, and in-house intrigue, all of Ned's protégés are most likely slated for employment termination as early as Thursday, Your Honor. If our knowledge and persistence is severed, no one at the firm cares to continue this case. It will be transferred to another law firm, if one can be found. Ironically, the historical case, which I can not ethically detail, is of interest to the firm to keep from ever seeing the light of day. In the end, Linda Lowry will be left without effective and fully cognizant representation. Because of her father's injuries, again ironically, indirectly caused by her mother's actions while a collegian, I appear to be the only person standing in the way of that happening to Linda. So, I am trying to give a little slip to Lady Justice's blindfold, just to get the Lowrys in front of your bench before court is adjourned for the day on Thursday." For the moment she was done. But both of them knew there was still more to come. Only Soro knew the whole of it.

Judge McCarver leaned forward, Soro thought toward her, but he was extending to reach his intercom and depressed the button. "Ramona, please notify counsel our first hearing of the day will be delayed by twenty minutes. Thank you." He boosted himself back and straightened up in his chair. "Ms. Soro, you are certainly tugging at the bench's heartstrings. You know that. Do you not?"

"I am aware of His Honor's exceptional interview with Linda Lowry at her custody hearing two years ago. Yes, your Honor," she admitted.

"And you're counting quite heavily on that affinity and inclination still being alive and well, are you?" he inquired.

"I am, Your Honor," she conceded.

"Let's say I am intrigued enough to ask how you see this working. Are you equipped to do that in the next five minutes," he required.

"I am, Your Honor," she replied, hoping against hope, and the big hand on the wall clock.

"Of course, you are. Why should that surprise me?" he smiled for the first time in the audience.

"Your order says that the custody hearing can only be continued when both living parents are before you in court. I know it was never envisioned that 'living' or 'court' would need definition. But it would not be the first time a sitting judge held court remotely. And it certainly would be a stretch to assign competency to a stroke victim, but there are precedents, albeit not necessarily in other custody cases," she waited a moment to regroup.

McCarver asked, "Do you think Mrs. Lowry and her attorney would accept such an arrangement? Quite frankly, I'd want assurances of that before I made any commitment to pursue this. You realize another complication is that Long Island is another jurisdiction, even though it's still in New York?"

"If this audience wasn't already off the record, here's where I'd ask for it to be—so underscoring that as a matter of habit—off the record, I think they would both jump at it, Your Honor." Her heart was palpitating and she hoped it did not show in her neck or temples.

"Why is that, Attorney Soro?" And then he added, "Off the record."

"Graphically, Your Honor, Myles Lowry is effectively roadkill at the moment, and will be at this hearing. It's a suitable reference for Attorney Mellon, for whom chasing ambulances is too strenuous an activity. Mrs. Lowry has never passed up an unfair advantage where doing battle with a man is tilted in her favor. She has spent the entirety of this divorce and custody settlement period leveraging people and power, motivated less in favor of her daughter than against her husband. She won't look at him in a bed any more sympathetically than in a chair. It won't bother her if all he can do is blink once or twice at me to say yes or no."

'You have until court starts this afternoon at two o'clock to assure me they are in favor. I'll have Ramona look into changing the court calendar and protocols for remote hearings," he told her. "I hope you understand I am no more inclined, nor prejudiced, to find one way or the other under these conditions than I was two years ago, nor was ready to do so on August 31st."

She didn't know whether to say, "No, Your Honor," or "Yes, Your Honor," so she said both and then getting up said, "Thank you, Your Honor."

From the first floor pay phone in the courthouse she called Eleanor and Gaby on the steno pool phone. "Where are you, we're so depressed," said Costa.

"I just met McCarver. You have no time for depression, Gaby," she scolded. "Linda is counting on you to be at your best. Find Danny and get him ready to talk to me on the phone in fifteen minutes, and to be ready right after that to either come to our office or drive to HAPPYDALE. And please have Eleanor call the hospital and find out about Myles. I need him to be able to listen and comprehend by late Thursday morning. Have her get an assessment before noon today. Have you got all that?"

Karidja might just as well have stuck Gaby's finger in a wall socket. "Yes," she said, hung up the phone and got started. "Eleanor," she shouted into the reading room.

364

Rosalyn had arranged the chairs comfortably, making sure the room did not look like a classroom or lecture space, getting rid of the podium with the microphone and pushing the table over against a back wall they would not be facing. If any of them brought refreshments, though she hadn't asked for anybody to do that, they would go on that table. She put extra copies of the stapled three-page tale of Rumpelstiltskin one the corner of the table for anyone who needed or wanted one.

She began warmly, "I am so happy to welcome you to the first of what I hope will be many occasional book club gatherings this school year. Moms and librarians have in common the desire to see exciting worlds beyond our

daily living, to allow ourselves to be stimulated by the possible, and to let our imaginations soar to places we wish to be."

She continued, looking from face to face of this first assembly. "I started with a familiar story, Grimm's "Rumpelstiltskin," so we could experience as adults what we might only have thought to be a tale for kids. These brothers wrote these narratives after interviewing common people in society, in the countrysides and towns. These were the oral traditional folktales their parents told them in Germanic societies. But the Grimms changed them repeatedly, sometimes for their own considerations and others due to pressure from religious or social authorities. There was a terrible amount of violence and brutality in the oral tales. They toned some down and cranked others up—depending on the story and the edition of the printed versions."

"All that aside, what did you think of the story in the version we read?" she asked. "Who's heard the story before?"

One of the moms of a girl older than Linda said, "It sure wasn't the Disney version I read to my kids. It was one of those happily ever after ones. But if I remember right, her father tells a lie to start all the trouble."

Rosalyn said, "After you read this version, you may find if you go back to the Disney version, you will read it more critically. Especially of how badly the men in the story treat the young girl on her way to that happy ending."

One lady who was not at the coffee table in the mornings, said she heard about the club 'on the grapevine.' She never admitted the grape vine was planted in a pot in Beatriz Grey's office. She asked, "Why does the Grimms' version of the story showed the girl so harshly treated?"

Rosalyn explained that some of the commentary books she read in the Philadelphia library detailed the physical ailments that real spinners in society suffered: fingers pricked by spindles, thread cutting their hands, backs and arms and feet and legs injured from repetitive motion, and eyesight damaged by dwindling candlelight in workshops and homes. And, of course, Rosalyn emphasized it was men who benefited economically and in status from the fruits of these spinning laborers.

The librarian-book club leader got a big surprise after she read the quote from the school library's newly purchased copy of Maria Tatar's book, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales.* Rosalyn said she'd keep the book on reserve with a week's time for each person who wanted to take it out on loan. She was reading from page 127 she told them, in case they wanted to note that page and read it later. *"The entire cast of male protagonists in "Rumpelstiltskin" can be seen as a set of mixed characters: guardians, protectors, and benefactors become each in turn the heroine's adversaries."*
She read to them about the girl's abuse by her father, the king, and the title character. And then she read the literary and psychological analysis of the story: *"Each crisis in the various phases of the heroine's life is marked by the transformation of a helper into a villain and the emergence of a new helper as countervailing force to the turncoat. The heroine's life turns into a succession of crises in which she is put at risk by the very figure who liberated her from the previous crisis. And in nearly every case it is deceit that gets her into trouble or deceit that saves her."*

Rosalyn closed the book and set it down on her chair next to her. She asked, "Does that sound familiar in your life? It sure does in mine and in some people I know."

The ladies before her were somewhat aghast. They had read a story for fun. They came here to chat with other women instead of facing regular chores of motherhood or their households.

Her one-time community greeter and chauffeur, Margie, in all her gruffness, like a troll beneath a bridge, stood up and told Rosalyn and the ladies in the book club, "I don't see where it's what's between these people's legs or what's their parts for baby making, it's more what's between their ears and in their hearts. Mrs. Lowry, this is too much for me. I have to wonder if this is really about the Grimms, and the spinning girl, and the odd creature with the tongue-twister name. It seems it's more about your anger that you're here at HAPPYDALE in the first place and your girl got messed up at the picnic last night. She placed the printed story on her chair and said, "There's too many agendas here for my liking. She walked out of the assembly space and left the library completely, making her away across the quad to who-knew-where.

At first only one or two of the others followed suit, and then, remarkedly, every one of the women up and left. Only a few mumbled words like 'sorry' and 'thank you.' Most just left quietly, without speaking a word to

her or to each other. Only two took their copy of the story. The rest left them behind.

Rosalyn was overcome with a fierce sense that Margie had purposely planned to betray her . . . that the walkout was more about the babysitting money her daughter lost out on, and not the book club or the Grimms' story at all. Her helper had deceived her and been transformed into a villain.

She straightened the room out. The papers were collected and thrown away. The table was dragged back from the wall and recentered. The chairs were placed around it. It resumed its character as the library's conference room. And the librarian returned to her office. There was not a trace of there ever being a book club. It had a twenty-minute life span. It disappeared just as the little man did when he stomped and stomped his feet in angry frustration at having been found out, named, and called out. This was not an assimilation of character that Rosalyn envied and strived to achieve.

365

Danny had read the email notification three times and returned Gab's call before going out for the morning. He did not have anywhere essential to be. Just like many of his renters, he had some end-of-the-month chores to do around the place. He did not begrudge the time. There was no answer. He left a message for her to call back.

Since he could hear the phone on the first floor, he went down to straighten some things out. One of his tenants came in looking for him.

"¡Buenos días! How is Flash today?" Danny said.

"Not so bad. Change of plans today, though. Wonder if I could ask a favor?"

"What is it?" replied the landlord in Danny.

"I wonder if I could do my vehicle month-end this morning. Schedule changed. I lost work and had to send my guys home. If I take care of the

vehicle today, instead of my usual last day of the month, I won't feel like the day is wasted. And then maybe I can take a make-up job tomorrow."

"Danny told him, "Sure, I'll get the gate from in here. Here's the padlock key. You know how to close it up behind you. Hose and vacuum should be in their regular spots on the wall."

Hart walked over to the security panel. When he saw Flash's vehicle make the turn into the drive behind the building, and then saw the man get out and key the padlock, Danny electronically signaled the fence to roll open. He waited until he could see the side of the SUV all the way onto the garage apron. He read the signage while his neighbor went to close the fence over and latch it safely. It was a beautiful hand painted job along the side doors, below the tinted glass.

The Flash
Let Us Make Your Home New Today—In a Flash
Kitchen Remodels, Decks, and Outdoor Living

Hart saw the gate was secure and the garage door opened properly. And then he heard the phone ringing. He ran across to the office and picked it up. When he heard her voice, he began to commiserate. She would not have it though he discovered. "Not now, Dan. Lots to do in little time. Can you wait there for a phone call in ten minutes from Karidja? And then be ready to drive here or to **HAPPYDALE** right after that?"

"What's happening, Gabs?" he wanted to know.

"Soro went to see Judge McCarver. Something's going on. We won't know what until she gets here." she reported.

"Do I have time to call and check on Riley?" he asked.

"Yes, but don't stay on long," she demanded. And then before she let him go to their separate tasks, she said, "Dan?" When he said 'yes,' she told him, "Dan, promise me you'll always stay being a nice guy. Please?" And she placed the receiver down before he could answer.

He gripped and stared at the phone handle for a full minute. He wished he was two decades younger. He called the hospital and asked about Riley.

"Hello, Mr. Investigator," intoned Detective Howe's voice. She was making her first-of-the-day visit to Riley's room. When he asked about Mike, she gave him an update. "I saw this once before when a patrolman was in a medically induced coma after taking a gang creep's bullet through the eye, Serpico-like. It's really something."

Danny jumped at her over the phone. "Are you saying Mike's in a coma now?"

"Oh, God, no. He's coming along fine, according to the doctors. Ahead of schedule, in fact. What I was describing was something else. Mike still is sleeping and medicated. But the PT and OT techs come in here three times a day. They rotate him from side to back to side, never face down, of course. They are gentle with his arm and shoulder. But they exercise his limbs by steady and slow movements, bending at the knee and elbow joints. They want to make certain his muscles and nerves all keep up to speed and he doesn't start to atrophy." She paused to let the images set in.

"She gave him a pretty good, old-fashioned beat down, Danny. But Mike's a tough guy. All that dog walking and checking on the neighbors. Climbing stairs and traipsing down to the stores rather than driving. He's so much better off than lots of guys, especially vets, his age. They are real hopeful he'll be in rehab in another week and home in a month, Danny. It's very good news."

Danny dared to ask. "And how about you, Detective? Feeling better about this whole Riley thing and all? His dog and such?" When she said she was and her voice convinced him of that, he said, "Well you must have your gun back, then, huh?"

"Amen to that, brother," was her odd reply.

"Okay, then, Howe. I have to go. Be talking to you." he said.

"Soon I hope, Mr. Hart." She told him.

With that connection made, he was heading up to be ready for Karidja's recall, and a possible quick departure. But before he went upstairs on the elevator, he went down to see Flash. He called across the garage space

so he could keep the elevator door open with his arm. "I may have to go out in fifteen minutes. Sorry. But I'll be disturbing you. Maybe you should vacuum inside first, before starting with the hose on the outside."

Danny was familiar with this monthly routine. The man kept his ride clean. He carried his crew in this one vehicle, a hefty Chevy Suburban, classic black. Tinted windows to keep out the sun's heat and to deter would be thieves from eyeing their tool kits in the back. It gave them only one vehicle at the job site, so as not to clutter up the client's driveway or require several spots for street parking. It projected a top-end contractor for top-of-the-line woodworking. And it assured Flash that none of his guys would be late or miss work over transportation issues.

366

It wasn't even yet ten o'clock. "Rumpelstiltskin" was bothering her. Not the book club; the enduring, inescapable folklore of it. How women were treated back then—and still were—almost a hundred and seventy years later: Justice. Womanhood. Motherhood. Without making a pun or joke out of it, she convinced herself she was feeling pretty grim. The only thing for it she decided was going across the quad and asking to see Beatriz Grey.

When she approached the administrator's administrative assistant, the woman did a double take. "Hello, Mrs. Lowry. I was just told to call over to the library and ask you to come see my boss. She'll be impressed. Give me a moment, please, to see if she's ready to see you yet.

She came out the door, leaving it open behind her, and motioned with one hand, "All set. Please go in." And when Rosalyn entered, she realized the woman had keep her position, so she could close the office door.

"Good morning," said Grey. As once before, she sat at her desk with just three file folders on it. They were all vanilla manilla and they were resting atop each other. Rosalyn could not read the hand printed pencil entries on the file tabs.

"I understand you came here to see me. Before knowing I was sending for you." she noted. "Why don't you go first. Mine can wait."

Rosalyn began without foreplay. "I am very upset about what went on at the picnic on the quad last night."

"You'll have to narrow that down for me, Mrs. Lowry." Her face was not quite Cheshire cattish, but close.

"My daughter was bullied and mistreated badly by two boys . . . so not students . . . at the behest of the same girl who has been harassing her . . . despite all my efforts to improve relations among Mrs. Steadman's class rivals."

"Do you include in those efforts the battling board game being surreptitiously waged under the guise of reading instruction in the library afternoons?" She picked out the middle of the file folders and flourished it above her desk. "Which Clementine's mother formally complained about this morning—as has not having quieted, but significantly escalated rivalries?"

Rosalyn remained silent. To prod her mercilessly, Beatriz Grey expressed regret that her daughter had been maltreated at the barbecue, saying all she could suggest was that Rosalyn kiss her daughter to make it all better.

"I wasn't aware that a parent had complained. I am truly sorry. I fully intended to respect the request she made on my doorstep last night when she was helping with Linda. I have already terminated that activity, effective immediately."

"And it's parents, not parent, Mrs. Lowry. I have a more formal complaint of misuse of school library funds and time and materials. It was made just this morning, from a person I thought liked you. Regardless, what caught my attention was that you held an unsanctioned session of the adult book club that I have yet to approve. And another participant filed a report that your presentation was antagonizing and inappropriate. So, along with *Insecta* gaming, you are also immediately to cease and desist with this outreach to adults and parents under library auspices. Understood?"

"Yes, Ms. Grey," was her respectful reply, which was code for what part of Rosalyn's body the administrator could bend back around to kiss. Her imagined jealousy from the evening before dissipated, as Grey picked

up the second folder and placed it across to the other side of the desk to join the first that had migrated there.

"And almost finally, a delegation of half a dozen teachers here at HAPPYDALE, across several grade levels has petitioned me not to circulate a suggested reading list for their students. They claim to have seen some of the lists for other grades and drafts somehow erroneously emailed from your desk computer recently. There are strong objections to some of the titles and extremely warm receptions for others. They are asking for a committee review before publication."

She continued. "Since those errant emails were sent this past weekend, they were either electronically misdirected from your research in Philadelphia or improperly accessed in your absence. While I will look into that to protect the integrity of our computer system and personnel, I concur with the essence of the petition. So, until we have a structure for such review, please do not create any keyboarded drafts of lists you are considering. Please hand copy any on your workstation for your reference and then delete the electronic drafts or final copies that exist, as well as any typed manuscript files."

With that, she placed the last vanilla manilla atop the others.

Rosalyn mentioned, "You said 'almost' finally.

"Yes, the ethics and housing rules committees are conducting an inquiry about male companions staying in your place here at the school after the established curfew, or during the day during class time."

"I see. Well, thank you for the heads up on that." she said.

"That's all I have for now, with one additional request, if you please," she concluded.

"Yes?" replied Rosalyn, imagining the smell of fire and ash pouring out of the roof of du Maurier's Manderley.

"I'd like you to take the rest of the day off, as well as tomorrow. Use that time to attend to Linda's needs, please. I require Miss Alex's services elsewhere on campus." She collected the files off her desk and turned around

to place them in the vertical stand on the credenza below the window looking out on the quad. She remained looking out until she heard the door to the office open and close behind Lowry as she departed.

She saw Rosalyn making her way toward her campus home. She opened her office door and advised her assistant to expect Alexandria sooner than later for an unscheduled appointment.

What she didn't see because she came away from the window was that Rosalyn did not make it home before coming upon Linda and Alex talking their morning walk. She called to them, and Linda began running to her mother. Alex called out, "Linda, you can't run!"

"Mrs. Lowry, we were on the way to find you at the library," Alex told her.

"Why?" Rosalyn asked.

"A man called on the phone. A Mr. Mellon. He said it was extremely urgent and that I should beg you—no kidding, that's the word he used, 'beg' you—to call him back right away. I left his number on your kitchen counter. He said to tell you these words. 'It's about Linda and time is running out.' I am sorry he wouldn't explain. He said that would only waste time and that it was a private matter anyway."

"Did you leave anything at our place?" she asked.

"No, it's all in my car. We were going to go for a ride after our walk," she explained.

"That's good. Ms. Grey sent me home for today and tomorrow to be with Linda because she has an assignment for you. Please take this for all you've done for us." Rosalyn handed here two fifty-dollar bills.

"That's too much," she said.

"You have no idea how much you mean to us," Rosalyn told her. She just hoped that would be enough endearment cash to elicit one or two last favors.

367

Rosalyn barely had time to use the bathroom and convince Linda to take a short nap, in case they wanted to go out in the afternoon. She wanted free, uneavesdropped phone time.

Her foot hadn't stepped on the kitchen floor and the phone rang. She was still simmering and was going to be short with Mellon for calling again. "Why can't you be patient. I just got back from working." The man on the other end automatically, but mistakenly, attributed her cranky voice to PMS.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Lowry." It wasn't Mellon and she couldn't place the man's 'phone voice' but she had heard him speaking in person recently. Just as it came to her, he said, "This is the Insurance man from yesterday at the bank."

"Yes sir? I am sorry, I thought another person was bothering me on the phone," she less-than-more explained.

"Well, I won't keep you. I wanted to tell you that the final reckoning for your finder's fee, at the full fifteen percent rate, rounded out without the pennies, came to $ 174,000. We should be able to have that all ready in a few days." He was taken aback that she did not let out the typical whopping and hollering finders usually used to greet such news. He thought maybe the connection was broken, so he spoke her name to see if she was still there, "Mrs. Lowry? Are you there?"

"Yes. Yes. I am. I'm trying to figure out what to do." She was thinking. "Is that going to be a check or in cash—I don't want bonds."

He laughed. "Well I know the bank director would really like to talk to you about opening an account and banking the money with them. What do you think?" he inquired.

"Listen this is great news. But give me a day to think it through and talk to my accountant—which of course she did not have—and I'll get back to you. And I may not be at this number, so I'll have to call you. Okay?" she left it at that.

She heard his voice trailing off—saying 'fine'— as she reached for the phone, depressed the cradle button, and then dialed the number Alex had left her on the counter.

"Godfrey Mellon's line," said the voice.

"Miss Hayes?" she guessed correctly. "This is Rosalyn Lowry returning the attorney's urgent call."

Hayes put Rosalyn through without wasting a moment on formalities or pleasantries. "Mrs. Lowry. I was called this morning by Attorney Soro. She made an extraordinary inquiry. I have to confess I don't know why. And I don't expect to find out why."

"What did she ask you?" she said.

"She wanted to know what you—and to a degree, I—thought about participating in a custody hearing Thursday morning, held in Myles's hospital room." He let her think about that.

She posed a question, "Do you think he's dying?"

Godfrey replied, "Why on earth would you think that, Mrs. Lowry?"

"Because you told me the hearing was on hold until both Linda's living parents were back in front of him in court."

Godfrey racked his brains. "I did?" He simply could not recall telling her that.

She realized her error—she had heard this on the HAPPYDALE van from Hart and Flynn—and decided to twist it to her advantage. "No other Attorney has been talking to me. So, I don't know. It is true, though, right?"

"Yes, it is," he reluctantly admitted.

"Well, that's the important thing here. So, do you think he's dying?" she repeated the question.

"I don't really know," he exclaimed.

"What's the advantage for me if he is—and if he isn't?" she cut to the chase.

Mellon exhaled. Give me a minute, I was thinking along different lines. I must reconsider."

Rosalyn recalled that her impression of Mellon had been that he tried not to be a pompous ass, but sometimes he just couldn't get out of his own way. She remined him, "Mr. Mellon . . . you're the one that said tick-tock, tick-tock."

"Yes. Yes. I know, he said. "Here's my best guess on short notice . . ."

"Attorney Mellon, use your cross-examination mind, not your fee-by-the-hour one, please!" she chortled to get his goat.

"Delightful, as always, Mrs. Lowry," he parried. "I don't know his current will. But if he dies and leaves everything to your daughter, neither of you have access until she's eighteen. That's a dozen years way. That's bad enough. But if he dies with this custody in limbo as it is now, are you prepared for a court fight to keep her from being 'warded' to the state. In some rare cases that has happened. A friend of the court files what's called an 'amicus brief' on behalf of the minor, claiming the surviving parent is unfit. If that happens and succeeds, you lose your daughter and the money. "

"Attorney Mellon, who on God's green earth would file such a brief?" she asked in exasperation.

"Well, Rosalyn, if I may call you Rosalyn for this consideration—I'd say your friend Marie Aello would be on the top of that list."

"And why in hell would she do that?" she quizzed him.

"Asked and answered, as they say. That's where she thinks you just put her, and she'd love to return the favor. Basic human history, Rosalyn. Relationships 101 for you college types: Hate, Revenge, Spite, Blackmail . . Just to name a few."

He pressed her, to tweak her for that 'fee-by-the-hour' remark.

"Mrs. Lowry. Do you think your husband on his death bed and Ms. Aello in her jail cell are prone to one last conspiring—to screw you but good, as they say?"

"Mr. Mellon? You would be conflicted in that case. Would you side with me and Linda or with Aello, without or without Myles?" she waited. "Honestly, now. Which?" she almost was interrogating him.

"Honestly. I'd follow the money and pick which one of you had the best chance to win and pay me handsomely to assure it." She had asked for it. He gave as good as he got.

"Delightful, as always, attorney Mellon." She segued, "Let's now go to the 'he's alive and well,' or at least 'expected to get well,' arguments. I'm asking you as my attorney, why is he doing this now? And can you beat him while he's flat on his back?"

This was an easier question for an overconfident Mellon to answer. "It smells of desperation. But I don't know the cesspool it's rising from. My instinct is that it's too close to my whooping them yesterday for millions of dollars that belonged to Ned Hegerman for it not to be connected. But I'm not seeing a clear bridge between the two yet."

Rosalyn posited, "Even so, as we did before in 'the-dead-man-can't-be-walking scenario,' what are my chances of winning what I've always wanted, permanent custody of Linda?"

Mellon still could not get over how callous she could be when it came to Myles. "As I told you yesterday when we didn't know this was going to be offered, we can beat him six ways to Sunday." His bravado was contagious.

Her motives to go forward were based on the disasters on the ascent in the constellation of HAPPYDALE, not her lucky stars in the courtroom. But she would not let Mellon know that and subscribe a weakness to her he might exploit, which he would in a heartbeat. "Should we tell them yes, then?" she asked.

"I would, Mrs. Lowry. And they need to know by noon, so I'm glad we were able to go over all these aspects together." He reassessed his timing, counted to six, and then asked, "Am I authorized to call Attorney Soro on

your behalf and express our willingness to participate on Thursday, bedside?"

"Yes, you are." She told him.

"I'll get on it and get back to you, then," he assured her.

She raised her voice some to get his attention before he rushed off the phone. "I'm still thinking about your question concerning moving back to the apartment. So, if you don't get me on this phone, it's not because I took Linda away again. We'll just be very busy. I will call your office at the beginning and end of each business day and keep in touch with your Miss Hayes. I promise," she affirmed and ended the call.

Mellon looked for Soro's phone number and remarked out loud, even though he was alone in his office. "That was the first time she admitted to me that she took Linda away."

368

When Danny's phone rang, for the second time since he came upstairs, he thought it was a follow-up call from Karidja. On her first call, she had given him the outline about the hospital hearing. Now he was waiting for directions of where to go and what to do, in case Karidja needed some assistance. In the meantime, he was paying bills and going over his monthly calendar to prepare invoicing for services rendered that busy September. He'd been asked to do this for a quick and dirty estimate for Thomas Bruce at one point, but this was his precise accounting, done much more carefully.

And so, when the phone rang, he answered in his typical safe-minded manner. "Hello?"

"Yes. This is Mr. Hart, isn't it?" said the woman.

"It is," he replied.

She wondered if his phone was tapped. So, she figured she'd go with what the politicians referenced on Sunday morning TV panels: anonymity for plausible denial, "It's Linda's mother."

"I always answer that way, Mrs. Lowry. Like I did the other evening. Please don't be put off," he offered. "The only recording is after the machine directs you to leave a message. This is a confidential and untraceable phone line. You should feel free to use it at any time on any day. If I'm not here, I check it frequently and as soon as I can get to a public pay phone—also mostly untraceable—I will call you back."

"I hear some of the tech staff around here mulling over phones they can carry with them. Have you heard of them?" she queried.

"I have a police detective colleague who threatens to gift me one at Christmas," he confided. "To what do I attribute your call?"

"If you had said 'owe the honor' I would have hung up and seldom talked to you ever again, Mr. Hart," she asserted.

"I try to avoid clichés, except for getting someone to think or pay attention by twisting one around." He did not offer an example.

"Speaking of twisting someone around, I have a favor to ask of you, because others are twisting me around," she confided, by word and tone.

"Anyone I know?" he busybodied in.

"Grey and Mellon, mostly; and two of the moms here," she stated. "And maybe a Miss Soro, unless you can vouch for her."

"For Karidja, I'd vouch until the elephants came home," he suggested.

"So, since I am paying attention, why elephants? Got something against the cows," she poked around.

"Just my way of reminding people that she is from the Ivory Coast, whose national soccer team has an elephant for a mascot. Breaks up that Borden's milk cliché, like you were saying before." Hart teased and taught at the same time.

"Can you give me an insight about why she wants a bedside custody hearing Thursday?" she inquired.

"No, I can't," he answered.

"Can't or won't?" she pushed.

"Amounts to the same thing, results are the same," he said definitively, without answering her question. Strangely, he thought, she seemed to accept that ambiguity and did not rail against it.

"I may be inclined. But please don't scoop Mellon on that. He gets all pissy," she informed him.

"Why tell me, Mrs. Lowry?" he asked.

"Still a little formal there, Mr. Hart. What can be done about that, do you suggest?" She presented him with a quandary.

"May I ask you feelings about being addressed as 'ma'am'?" It was his best gambit.

"That seems like a very solid compromise between the two of us. Generally, I'd fly off the handle. But not so with you, I suspect," she admitted.

"I don't know if that makes me comfortable or worried, ma'am." He answered.

"I'll just say, I'm not trying to work you. I probably need you to be comfortable with neutrality, cause that's all I'm really offering here." she asserted, characterizing the situation, which definitely wasn't going to elevate to a relationship.

"Could you say why that is, ma'am?" Danny was curious.

She answered him at more length than she had to date. "So far, Mr. Hart, you're the only person without a vulva who hasn't lied to me in the last year. And I don't trust Godfrey Mellon not to make his mother pregnant. So, I guess you're it. I hope you don't mind the process of elimination, but it's the

best I can offer. It appears to be just who I am and how I act. And, it doesn't hurt that, for her own reasons that remain a mystery to me, my daughter seems to like and trust you."

Danny Hart conjured a few scenarios in his investigator's crystal ball, which always reminded him of the black, fortune telling magic eight ball from his junior high days. He was willing to give this a run, because it seemed to benefit Linda with a manageable risk.

"Okay ma'am, what would you like?" he felt as if he was poking the belly of the beast in a fantasy tale.

"A ride please. For two." She said without the details.

"Anyone I know? Anywhere I know?" he inquired.

"All four are known to you. How soon can you be here. Is the apartment habitable?" she required.

"You remember Flynn?" he asked.

"HAPPYDALE railroad van lady? Yes," she replied, "Mellon's hire?"

"One and the same. She has a key and knows the cleaning company. I can call and see if they could do a turn today before you get there," he surmised.

"Would Mellon or Hayes know?" she exhumed a concern for privacy.

"That can be seen to, I imagine, without much ado; for a while anyway. It won't be witness protection level," he said without promising.

"He'll know by nightfall or Wednesday morning. But that's enough time." She did not demure.

"What time would you care for me to be there, ma'am?" he asked.

I'd like to be long gone before classes end at three fifteen. I could have our things packed and ready to go by two-thirty. Do you know the gravel drive behind our building?" she was now up to details.

"I do. I can use that, if you prefer," he indicated.

"Please do, Mr. Hart," she confided. "Well, that should be it. Am I forgetting anything, Mr. Hart?"

"It's not a 'forgetting' ma'am," he hesitated.

"Don't hold back now, Mr. Hart. Out with it," she cajoled.
"It's more in the way of a suggestion, ma'am. And I don't have any standing to make such an observation, but I have strong feelings on the matter, if I may be free to speak without offending you." Hart was sincere.

"Please tell me," she said.

"If you have the forty minutes to do it, ma'am. I think if you made Linda's afternoon walk one last excursion up to her caboose . . . I think it would be something you both could hold on to for a nice long time."

"Under advisement, Mr. Hart. Thank you," she rang off.

Danny called Karidja immediately. He started right in, "Do you have a task for me yet?"

"Why, are you not going to be available?" she wondered. "I haven't been successful with Mrs. Lowry yet. So, I don't know."

"Are you sitting?" he asked her.

"Should I be? You always have my attention." The lawyer assured him.

"I just don't want you falling down and getting hurt, is all," he replied.

"Does that mean what I hope and pray it does, Mr. Hart?" she only then took her seat.

"It does. Mrs. Lowry just had me on the phone. She called here. For a favor," he related to the attorney, who was still surprised but not entirely shocked.

Soro managed to say, "Well, the last favor you did her turned out to be pretty profitable. You kept her out of jail and got her a big payday. I just hope you're around the next time I need a ride to the bank."

Hart answered more seriously than her jest suggested he might. "Please be forewarned and careful, Karidja. All I did was provide transportation and an escort. I must assure you she did all the rest. And only some of it could have been scripted ahead of time. Most of what she accomplished was pure chutzpah and thinking on her feet, while those buffoons thought she was sitting." He took a breath. "And Karidja. All she has asked me for again is a ride and an escort—from **HAPPYDALE** back to their apartment—this afternoon. I'm tempted to say lock, stock, and barrel—but knowing where that comes from, it would make me nervous. Especially because she doesn't want Mellon to know."

"Okay, then. What time is your pick-up?" she said.

"Between two-thirty and three," He answered. "But wait, there's more."

"About this or something else?" she was patient with him. She wanted him to miss nothing due to her rushing him—which she might have been tempted to do, since Eleanor and Gaby had appeared at her door during the last exchange.

"Mellon asked her to consider coming back. But she's not telling him she will or won't, let alone that she is." When she did not respond, he realized she was giving him free rein. "Also, she flat outright doesn't trust him. Based on the bank experience, I would not be surprised if she sidesteps him in the hearing, to avoid him blindsiding her. So that might give you an opening for a resolution." He gave a thought and added, "And it sounds like she's played out the 'away school' gig, so I don't think she's running again in the near future." He stopped and looked at the clock. "That all I have on her."

"All very valuable insights, Danny. I'll tell the ladies. Be safe. Drive carefully." She told him. She thought he was leaving, but he jumped back on.

"Elsewise Karidja . . . Howe says Riley's coming along ahead of schedule . . . and I'm asking Flynn to get the Lowry apartment quietly tidied up without Hayes or Mellon knowing. Say 'hi' for me. 'Bye now, really."

Danny headed back to the garage. When Flash saw him, he turned off the vacuum so they could talk.

"Tell me, Flash," asked Danny, "do you believe in fate or coincidence?"

"Are you giving me choice to pick or asking about both?" he replied.

"How much are you losing today, sitting idle?" the investigator asked.
"Five hundred net." he said. "The rest is just gratification delayed."

"How's about $ 650 for the day and gas?" Danny proposed.

"She's got a big tank, Mr. Hart. And given your line of work, should I be asking for hazard pay?" he laughed as he spoke.

"Piece of cake. Just helping a client relocate, but my car's too small for their stuff. No furniture to refinish, Flash. Sorry. Just a mom and her six-year-old girl, is all. The little one will go crazy over your wheels, I'm sure." he said. "We can fill it up on the way and when we get back."

It would turn out to be the easiest deal Hart made all week.

369

"Hello again, Ramona," said Karidja. "I was to get back to His Honor before two. I am sorry if I'm interrupting your lunch."

"No, you're fine, Attorney Soro. He is just coming into chambers. He will be ready in a few moments to talk to you."

"You're early Attorney. Thank you for skipping any brinkmanship. What can you tell me?" He was surprisingly affable. His morning cases must have gone well, she thought.

"Mrs. Lowry has accepted Mr. Mellon's advice. Both are looking forward to being present on Thursday. And I am speaking for Mr. Lowry to affirm he would rather be nowhere else, on earth, that day." She hoped just to

relieve her tension, and was not looking for laughs. But she got one from the judge anyway.

"I have received affirmation from the county that all we must do is have Ramona file by three this afternoon and we can proceed. She has her schedule and is ready to move that day's calendar to Friday, which was a null day for closing out the prior month and had plenty of space."

"Thank you, Your Honor. This is a great thing you have done," she expressed with much gratitude.

"With all humility, I did very little. The great work is ahead. It is now up to you attorneys to represent this couple and see what can be done for this family." After he let that rest, he told Karidja, "It is up to you to make the proper arrangements at the hospital. We need to have enough space and no interruptions from medical personnel. Tell them Mr. Lowry must be ready for a ten o'clock start. They can have an hour from twelve to one, to see to Mr. Lowry, if we need him to be ready again for the afternoon."

370

In almost fantasy slow motion at five miles per hour, Flash glided his humongous black Suburban up the long driveway past the HAPPYDALE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL sign. His was the first passenger vehicle in a long time whose roofline was higher than the white fence bordering the lane.

Hart pointed the way off to the left, before the main entrance circle, to pick up the gravel path that wrapped around the property off beyond the quads. They rolled up gingerly attracting scant notice from dorms or classrooms. The office staffers and groundskeepers tried to recall which building was having renovations beginning that week. The Flash was a new contractor for most of them to see. They could not have guessed in just how much of a flash the dark-windowed Suburban would soon be gone

Rosalyn had left her bedroom window open to listen for Hart. She heard the crunching gravel under the tires and looked out to see an awesome black behemoth she would have to ask the driver to move. She stepped around their bags lining the hall to the back door, intended originally as a

fire-code-compliant emergency escape—who knew? She was still in the doorway as the passenger door opened and to her amazement Danny Hart emerged triumphantly.

Rosalyn had left Linda reading from the *Arabian Nights* in the living room while she packed up their last remaining things. But now she felt her daughter squeezing by and breaking the nursing guidelines about running. Hart felt her embrace around his hips and her head buried in his ribs.

"I'll start getting their things," said Flash to anyone listening, after opening the back swing gate of the Suburban. He approached the house door, but Rosalyn did not move. She did not know this man. Would she see their things again?" But Flash was a street-smart man of color, a well-spoken businessman and father, even if not school educated. "I'm Mr. Hart's tenant, Mrs. Lowry. Everyone calls me 'Flash' because they can't say my Ecuadorian name correctly. He told me in his investigatory manner that 'time was of the essence.' If you'd prefer me just to drive and stand back otherwise, I sure will. That's perfectly fine."

She pondered how Danny Hart was affecting her. With someone else, she would not feel the embarrassment that swept over her in this moment. "Certainly. Please take some of this. I am sorry. It's just . . ."

"Don't you apologize about taking care of your girl and being safe. If that's an old habit, please believe me, don't let it die." He took some of their luggage without knocking other things over that were leaning against the wall.

It took less than eight minutes for them to load the Suburban and get the ladies into the second seat and buckled in. Flash had paid extra for them to be installed, bolted as they were right into the floorboards under the wide bench seat. He wasn't about to lose good workers to some drunk driver. He knew the Suburban could last, but bodies tossed around in a car had a tendency to get broken.

Hart had made sure the ladies had used the bathroom before getting in. But now he asked Rosalyn, "Would you mind if we availed ourselves of the facilities before heading back?"

Her answer shocked Flash and amused Linda. It had no impact on Hart. "I'm never cleaning it again. Go right ahead. And, well, if your aim's not so good, I wouldn't be upset in the least."

Danny said, "Thanks. We'll do a sweep to make sure nothing's left behind.

Because he was closer to the vehicle, it was Flash who heard Linda, unable to undo her seatbelt, call out the lowered window. "My book, my book. I forgot it on the couch." He waved his hand in the air above his head, without turning back to face them, to assure her he had heard.

Both men got up into the Suburban, refreshed and ready to roll. Flash reached back and gave Linda her *Arabian Nights*. He looked in his additional interior rearview, installed so he could see onto the bench seat, and asked her, "Do you like music while you ride, Miss Linda?"

She could see him in the mirror from where she sat. "Sometimes, I guess . . ." She checked with her mother silently. Rosalyn did not commit one way or the other. She already had one miss with Flash before they even had gotten started. So, Linda completed her answer for herself, " . . . depends on the way it sounds."

"Okay then. Hold on, young lady. Here's because you like that book of yours."

After a gentle U-turn so as not to dig up the grass adjacent to the gravel path, and to make sure the ladies didn't get tossed side to side, Flash started the Suburban back out the way they came. But now, he said, "half-mast on your windows, you two over there on the right." Danny and Rosalyn complied just in time. A very odd sound to Linda and a familiar one to the adults was emitting from the six speakers throughout the vehicle, and the subwoofer back in the rear with their luggage and belongings.

The Suburban picked up speed, right to the upper speed limit posted for the **HAPPYDALE** campus. Students and teachers were just getting out of class and crossing the quad. From behind the trees and moving along the border of the grounds came the rocking sounds of Steppenwolf's "Magic Carpet Ride." It grew and grew in intensity and clarity. "You don't know what we've been fighting" they were told as Linda looked out at them from her

tinted window, into which they could not see. "Let the sound take you away" the singing voices proclaimed . . . at the top of the driveway Flash turned the Suburban right and they saw the long stretch of white fences dictating order and direction.

He lowered all their windows electronically from his armrest and turned the music up even louder . . . Linda clutched her storybook to her chest, shook her head back and forth, smiled and repeated in her six-year-old innocent singing voice what she was just learning . . . "why don't you come with me little girl on a magic carpet ride."

Flash had no way of knowing what excited her daughter would also exhilarate her daydreaming mother . . . Those early spring days at Barnard basking in bikini tops on blankets spread out on new mown grass . . . lecture halls professing fresh and wonderful ideas . . . late nights in the student lounge . . . And just as suddenly when the mixed tape cut was over and Flash muted the volume, there were student leaders debating, accusing, plotting . . . Myles on one side . . . Marie on the other. She and Valerie would have to choose. Which would it be? . . . And, lastly, a co-signed piece of paper . . . wafting on the Hudson's thermals . . . vanishing from sight . . . dissolved into vapor like a physics lab experiment gone awry.

To be continued at Part Four

