

ARCHITECT'S RENDITION



A NOVEL BY
HERB SCHULTZ

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ARCHITECTURE STARTS WHEN YOU CAREFULLY PUT TWO BRICKS TOGETHER.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

Once the sun had set completely behind the horizon, and the unusually brilliant February sky turned the color of a dark, painful bruise, the reflection of the Flatiron Building's office lights in Gerald Pfalzgraf's flat-screen display became an irritating distraction. The interior spaces of the Beaux-Arts skyscraper that had been illuminated all day would remain that way throughout the evening, no longer competing against the bright sunshine. Despite the annoyance visited upon him by the building's reflection, Gerald admired the Flatiron Building and the way it resembled a mighty plow, like a scene from a Depression-Era WPA mural, furrowing the concrete surface of Manhattan Island into rows called Broadway and Fifth Avenue. Still, the style of Daniel Burnham's limestone edifice with its ostentatious glut of architectural details – undulating bay windows, pilasters, dentils, tessellating patterns, and patriotic emblems that could be mistaken for pharaonic cartouche – was far removed from the style of the homes and buildings designed and constructed for wealthy individuals by Pfalzgraf Associates, Gerald's high-end boutique architecture firm. Pfalzgraf Associates dealt firmly in the International Style pioneered and branded by the Bauhaus movement of pre-war Germany.

Gerald noted there was something about the Bauhaus look that attracted the interest of powerful, wealthy men; something that compelled them to expend huge sums on custom-designed International Style homes. Often, Gerald's clients were men who grew

up lower-middle-class and as children lived in boring mid-century tract houses. By ditching the raised-ranch and the white picket fence and the geraniums and the circular above-ground pool rusting in the tiny back yard for the clean, cold, urbane look of Bauhaus, these men hoped to expunge, once and forever, their ordinary, depressing pasts. Gerald could tell a lot about a couple's relationship by how effectively the man forced the antiseptic architecture down the throat of his wife or girlfriend. Women seemed generally less captivated with Bauhaus, preferring a place adorned with gingerbread, and gables and frou-frou much like the dollhouses built for them by their fathers when they were little girls. Pfalzgraf Associates eschewed such supernumerary elements like gingerbread and gables frou-frou for clean lines and sharp edges. Gerald liked sharp edges.

After turning the flat-screen of his iMac away from the glare of the lights of the Flatiron Building, Gerald opened a computer log-file. He clicked on a tab labeled "Oscar_1" and scrolled through a long list of websites, many with salacious domain names. Another tab labeled "Oscar_2" revealed a folder containing an assortment of child pornography and CAD-generated blueprints: a trove of screenshots captured every ninety seconds from Oscar Dupree's workstation for the past five days.

The saleswoman from ExaTrac Software Solutions had previously convinced Gerald to sign up for a three-month trial of her company's latest employee monitoring program, assuring him that the software would identify how and where to increase his employees' productivity without impacting the performance of the computer network. Gerald had reservations about installing a program that would essentially spy on his employees. He knew the saleswoman's claim about increasing his team's productivity was a bullshit line formulated to give the buyer of the software a plausible reason not to feel like a cheap Peeping-Tom.

Yet he was genuinely concerned that some of his firm's confidential information might be at risk of compromise, inadvertently or otherwise.

A few months earlier, Pfalzgraf Associates had been outbid on a contract by a competitor who seemed to know a bit too much about the particulars of a confidential Pfalzgraf prospectus. Another time, drawings bearing a remarkable resemblance to materials created over several months by Oscar and his design team appeared in the winning proposal submitted by a large Pittsburgh-based architecture firm: Curtain, Wall, Buckley and Company. Suspicious, Gerald set a bait of sorts by creating some phony documents about a "plan" whereby Pfalzgraf Associates and the Honniasont Indian tribe in Pennsylvania would collaborate on the construction of a large casino complex. He made the prospectus documents solely available to Oscar; if a hint of the bogus plan surfaced in any type of communication from Curtain, Wall, Buckley and Company, Gerald's Benedict Arnold would be unmasked. As yet the planted documents revealed nothing.

The price of ExaTrac's monitoring software during the trial period would be heavily discounted and Pfalzgraf Associates was under no obligation to purchase anything after the three months expired, so Gerald signed the license. ExaTrac's systems administrator installed the software on the company's network of workstations over the weekend. Now, five days later, on a Friday evening, Gerald Pfalzgraf had neither confirmed nor denied the existence of a security leak within his organization, but he had discovered that one of his employees is a disgusting pervert.

Gerald pushed his Brno chair away from his sleek desk and looked out the floor-to-ceiling windows of his eighteenth floor office across the Flatiron District of Manhattan. He began to fold and unfold his right ear with his thumb and forefinger, a habit formed in childhood

during pensive moments. The material Oscar had been viewing on company time was nasty and certainly illegal. *What the hell was he thinking?*

Oscar Dupree, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, was one of the more creative architects in the firm and he possessed decent leadership skills. He worked diligently, occasionally identified new business opportunities, and was a mentor to the junior employees. Regardless, Oscar's behavior posed a serious risk to the firm that Gerald had spent years of hard work and a lot of his wife Morcilla's money to build into a reputable and profitable enterprise. Gerald looked down to the street and spied yet another tourist posing in front of the Flatiron Building for a photo to be taken by a friend lying supine on the sidewalk, struggling to frame the tourist within the triangularity of the narrow, phallic landmark structure.

Gerald shook his head. *Goddamned Oscar.* The obvious move was to summarily fire his ass, but Gerald figured there must be a variety of ways to exploit for his own benefit the precarious position into which his employee had placed himself through his abject behavior. Gerald folded his ear, recalling a passage from *The Prince*, Nicolo Machiavelli's treatise on acquiring and perpetuating power: "There are two ways of contesting, the one by the law, the other by force; the first method is proper to men, the second to beasts; but because the first is frequently not sufficient, it is necessary to have recourse to the second. It is necessary for a prince to understand how to avail himself of the beast and the man."

A beast or a man – which shall it be? Gerald stood up, turned back toward his iMac and shut down the ExaTrac program.

Gerald was the last person out of the office. He preferred walking the two hundred fifty steps to the street level to riding in the claustrophobic pre-war elevator, the kind embellished with an art-deco arrow indicating the car's position by pointing to floor numbers arrayed in a semicircle above the doors.

Gerald lived with Morcilla, his wife of twenty long years in a 6,700 square foot classic eight, a lavish penthouse atop a premium Fifth Avenue building offering panoramic views of Central Park and the East River. But before heading uptown for home, tonight as on many nights after work he went first to Public Hair, a trendy bar where a girl named Wren poured drinks. Nearly everything in Public Hair – walls, doors, ceiling, floors – was rendered black. Even the bars of soap and the urinals in the men's room were black. Dim orange lights hung from the ceiling to a point twenty-one inches above the smooth black concrete bar top. Paintings of men with grotesque faces in the style of Francis Bacon hung on the walls around the dining area and in the hallway leading to the restrooms. The music leaching from the sound system was heavy with the likes of *My Life with the Thrill Kill Kult*, *Goldfrapp*, *Moby*, *The Brazilian Girls* and numerous unidentifiable purveyors of Trance. Although Gerald was repelled by the entire ambiance of Public Hair he was curiously persuaded to patronize it anyway, for a girl named Wren poured drinks.

Wren had smooth alabaster skin and shoulder-length golden hair that she wore in a variety of styles depending on her mood. She stood five foot seven and her well-toned, willowy arms and legs were

unmarred by garish tattoos so commonly worn by women her age. Her face resembled that of an ancient goddess – Peitho, maybe, the goddess of persuasion – sculpted from pure white virgin Marathi marble. And her jaw was perfect.

Wren had been home-schooled in a tiny hamlet in northern Vermont along with her older sisters, Sparrow and Robin. She could converse intelligently on any subject – even those she knew little about, for she possessed a remarkable and refreshing ability to pose intelligent questions, reason through impeccable logic, and weave pertinent analogies back to topics with which she was familiar. Her mind was uncluttered by boring facts and pointless stories, and her desire to learn was insatiable. After coming to Public Hair two or three nights a week for a couple of months, Gerald found himself curiously smitten over Wren. He had never felt this way before – well, maybe once. He did have a near-fatal crush on the first girl he laid: a nymphomaniac who quickly dumped him for a guy whose car had a bigger engine than Gerald's.

Gerald got the exhilarating sense Wren might be genuinely attracted to him, and this only increased Gerald's drive to spend time in her company. Wren was beautiful and intelligent – and that she was about half his age didn't hurt either. Her youth and social status posed no threat to Gerald's ego, an important factor as it also meant she would be more inclined to adore him. Gerald wanted to be adored; he needed to be adored. To induce this effect he would play the role of mentor to this young, inquisitive, beautiful, intelligent goddess, and guide her toward success in life and art and business. Gerald perceived himself to be precisely that: a success in life and art and business – after all, what is architecture but an art form that comes to life through business acumen? He intended to share his experiences lovingly with Wren. She would become his project.

Growing up in a middle-class neighborhood in Western Pennsylvania while attending an all-boys Catholic school, Gerald had been awkward around girls. Apprehensive about dating, he bolstered his confidence by going out with younger girls from poor families. He relished the way they seemed proud to be in his company. Once in a while another girl would behave jealously in the presence of his girlfriend, attempting to draw him away by offering the promise of greater affection – and it thrilled him. The younger girls in Gerald's life, those who were unfamiliar with the trappings of wealth, always seemed more ready and willing to adore him.

When Gerald was seventeen, he entered into debates with his father over the role money should play in love and marriage, staking out a position that he would never marry a girl solely because she was wealthy. If she had money, fine; but wealth would never be a condition for his happiness. There had to be more to a relationship than the mere existence of money and possessions, he argued. His father nodded his head, smiling with a hint of condescension: sure boy, you'll see. Years later Gerald did marry into money, and although by doing so he secured a fantastic lifestyle he failed to receive even a hint of adoration from his wife. On the contrary, Morcilla was overbearing and often treated Gerald with disdain – not out of hatred, but of habit. She made him feel like her social inferior – precisely the arrangement he feared as an adolescent. His happiness suffered as his financial prosperity grew.

“Hi, Ger. May I make you a Gibson tonight?” No one but Wren called him “Ger” – shortened to rhyme with “chair.” He would never have allowed it from anyone else. The first time Gerald went to Public Hair, Wren introduced herself and he reciprocated with his full name, Gerald. She immediately called him “Ger.” He chose not to correct

her, apprehensive about appearing foolish over the treatment of his name the way so many assholes in the field of architecture did. Besides, Wren was different, engaging, non-threatening. *Why screw up a potentially beautiful relationship over a dropped syllable?*

“I need a more manly drink tonight, Wren. Bring me a Macallan neat and a glass of water, please. You wouldn’t believe what I had to deal with at the office today.” Wren turned her body toward the bottle of well-aged scotch on the top shelf while facing Gerald in a display of genuine interest in his story of woe. He continued, “You remember that guy Oscar I told you about? Works for me? Well, this afternoon I discovered a whole load of kiddie porn on his computer.”

Wren wrinkled her nose which tightened up her perfect jawline, in turn giving Gerald a modest tingle in his loins. “That’s awful,” she said. “What are you going to do about it?” She presented him a glass containing twice as much Macallan than the owners of Public Hair would prefer their customers receive.

“Right now, nothing. I have to mull it over carefully.”

“Why not just fire him, Ger? I wouldn’t want to work in the same office with a pervert like that.”

Gerald was fond of single-malt scotches, and although he did not consider himself a world-class connoisseur, he truly believed he was capable of distinguishing the eighteen-year-old from the twelve-year-old. Drinking the earthy amber Macallan straight helped Gerald act more like an executive than an artist.

“I have to mull it over carefully,” he repeated. “Got to consider all the options. I might be able to use this against Oscar, you know, to get him to do something for me.” Wren was walking toward a couple who had just sat at the bar and away from Gerald as he uttered that last sentence. He kind of hoped she hadn’t heard him say it.

Upon returning she asked, "Like, what would you get him to do for you?"

The first time he met Wren at Public Hair – she had just taken the job after a stint at Jamba Juice churning up mango smoothies and other fruity treats – Gerald was wearing his favorite Ermenegildo Zegna suit and a brand new Jaeger-LeCoultre wristwatch. He almost didn't walk in. The place seemed too dark and edgy, but at that moment one of Gerald's favorite *Roxy Music* songs – "More Than This" – began playing. He walked in tentatively, and made eye contact with Wren the way people do when each is instantaneously attracted to the other.

Wren commented on how nice he looked, and observed, "What an elegant watch – what make is it?" Somewhat nervous, Gerald launched into a monologue about tourbillons and jeweled movements and perpetual calendars with moon phases. Eventually Wren had to step away to make a few Negronis for a bunch of Silicon Alley jerks. Good thing. "Jesus Christ," he muttered to himself, "what am I talking about? I must sound like a complete, bona fide dick." He twirled a stirrer in his Gibson, studying the onion juice as it leached into the gin, shaking his head in amazement at the volume of pomposity he had allowed to spill forth from his mouth. When Wren came back, Gerald lightened up significantly, having gulped down the Gibson the way he used to dispatch a glass of Hawaiian Punch as a child, thirsty from playing tag, and enjoyed the next few hours talking to her about movies, architecture, the north coast of Brazil, tobogganing in Vermont, growing up in Western Pennsylvania, and the genius of Donatello.

That was six months ago. Now Gerald was meeting Wren regularly at Public Hair to discuss more intimate affairs and to make plans for secret, sexy encounters.

On the memorable night Gerald transitioned from being Wren's regular bar patron to her enthralled lover, he arrived at Public Hair after having just flown into the City from Pittsburgh where he often went to meet with prospective clients. He was wearing a double-breasted Armani suit that showed off his trim build and made him appear taller than his six foot two frame. He looked sharp and felt good, and was exceptionally witty that evening. He could tell Wren was hoping he would come in – she practically bowled over another bartender to greet him, and had already taken out the cocktail onions in anticipation of his arrival. He told her all about the beautiful building sites he visited around Latrobe and Ligonier. He mentioned something about the stone quarries in the area, and that line of conversation led to Michelangelo and his sculptures, which then segued into a discussion of the Sistine Chapel and the marvelous Vatican collection. The Vatican led to the Catholic Church in general which prompted Gerald to note he had once been an altar boy back in Aliquippa.

Wren noted, "My ex-boyfriend was an altar boy back in Serbia. His experiences weren't too pleasant. He told me a pretty ugly story about a pedophile priest there." Gerald's ears pricked up at the mention of the "ex-boyfriend." Whenever a woman speaks to a man about boyfriends, ex- or otherwise, she is telegraphing her desire to try someone new. Gerald sensed that sentiment in Wren and it pleased him immensely. "Yeah, that's ugly," responded Gerald, his attention impaired from the rush of endorphins into his pulsating brain.

Wren had to go downstairs to check on some beer pipes or other such internal plumbing critical to the proper operation of a bar. When she returned Wren asked Gerald if he'd like to meet her for a drink after the Hair closed – at 2 a.m. Blood rushed to both his heads. "Of course," he replied energetically; inside he was cringing at

the god-awful time. He fired up the machinery in his brain to craft a story he would later pitch to Morcilla explaining the unforeseeable situation that would impact his timely return home from the office; a story concocted previously with some basic structure in case just such a situation arose. Promptly at 2, Wren walked out of the Hair with the gait of a runway model directly into Gerald's arms. She gave him a Jamba-Juicy kiss and matter-of-factly suggested having that drink in her apartment.

That night, the first time he made love to Wren, Gerald climaxed after an embarrassing ten seconds and was doomed to endure an hour of trepidation and burdensome flaccidity. He had never before considered Viagra; he didn't need it. Besides, he feared the side-effects, especially the one in which the patient might become unable to distinguish blue from green – that one was just too bizarre. Now he wished he had a packet of the diamond-shaped pills – and if he should suffer later from an erection lasting longer than four hours, well, he would gladly write a letter of commendation to the head of Pfizer for their commitment to quality.

Gerald tried to mask the anger and disappointment he felt toward his penis by talking to Wren non-stop about the immense challenges of running an architecture firm in Manhattan. He pretty much concluded he blew it with Wren – squirting after three thrusts, and then falling into a self-centered diatribe about how tough it is to be Gerald Pfalzgraf. Wren's iPod, set to shuffle, played a song Gerald hadn't heard in years, and one he was surprised she had in her iTunes library: "Choose Me," from the movie of the same name. Hearing Teddy Pendergrass's smooth, soulful voice declare "you're my choice tonight," and sensing from Wren's eyes that she felt likewise, Gerald ceased talking and forgave his member for the false-start. He then proceeded with some of his best love-making ever. He performed

spectacularly the second and third and fourth times that evening, as he knew he could, and afterwards laid there with Wren in her dumpy apartment in Clinton, formerly Hell's Kitchen, trying to recall the last time he had made love to a twenty-three-year-old. *Had to have been back at Carnegie Mellon University. Damn, where did the time go?*

Wren rolled on top of Gerald and with the enthusiasm of a kid she revealed that one of her secret thrills was to break into abandoned buildings and rummage around for artifacts. Wren revealed how on many occasions she had pried off padlocks, torn off hasps, jimmed hinges, smashed glass, slid through basement windows, climbed onto roofs. She was surprisingly successful in her invasions, walking the desolate hallways of old schools, scampering on defunct manufacturing lines, and in her favorite excursion, exploring the diabolical mid-century equipment of a long-shuttered psychiatric hospital. As Gerald listened to Wren describe like a wide-eyed child the lobotomy tools she came across in an old cabinet, and how she imagined they must have been used on the pitiable insane, he fell in love with her vivid imagination. That completed the picture, for he had already fallen in love with the rest of her.

Now, months later, things with Wren were operating better than his new \$19,000 Jaeger-LeCoultre watch and its hand-crafted tourbillion. Their relationship grew geometrically. To sate his appetite to be with Wren, Gerald worked out a variety of plans and alibis to deceive Morcilla, most of which were based on his extensive travel demands. In reality he genuinely had to be out of town frequently on business, so the deceptions never became increasingly bizarre as is often the case with the amateur adulterer.

In keeping with his desire to be her mentor, Gerald offered and Wren accepted the gift of tuition to pursue a college degree, a goal that was dashed after she left her family and their conditional financial

support in Vermont. Initially, Wren expressed an interest in pursuing architecture – no doubt influenced by listening to Gerald continually extol the virtues of the profession – but Gerald steered her into taking courses part-time toward a major in cinema studies at NYU instead. He was uncomfortable with the idea of Wren becoming an architect, in part because he believed at twenty-three years old and attending classes part-time, the degree would always seem out of reach and she would eventually quit in frustration. But the bigger component of his reasoning was to mitigate the possibility, however slight, that his apprentice might someday surpass him in his own field. He felt a bit guilty thinking that way, but it passed quickly.

Gerald trained one eye at the clock by his bed discovering it was not quite 6 a.m. He rolled his body to face away from the window through which unwanted morning sunlight was beginning to infiltrate its blinding rays. Bright mornings like this one reminded Gerald of his long-standing beef with the designer of his building for locating the master bedrooms along the east face. Gerald knew of no one in the building who truly appreciated the sunrise. In fact the blistering morning assault was often a conversation topic among the residents as they rode the elevator down to the street. *Can you believe a supposedly professional architect would forget the sun rises in the East?*

At any time of the day some part of Gerald's home on the thirty-second floor received a generous allotment of sunlight, but more often than not he found some fault with it: too bright to see his laptop screen; his vintage 1930s leather club chairs taking a bleaching; blinding glare off the polished marble floors. Surely, most Manhattan apartment-dwellers afforded but a solitary window facing out upon a bleak, dark, treeless courtyard, or a filthy brick wall, or into a tenement airshaft that would have been derided by Jacob Riis, would gladly lop off a pinky finger and two toes in exchange for pure, natural sunlight like that which bathed Gerald's penthouse. But to Gerald the sunlight was a nuisance.

Gerald heard the whirring sound of the treadmill. Morcilla exercised religiously on her treadmill every morning for half an hour. Her cardiovascular system was in tip-top shape, but she never lost any weight – her primary goal. Her parents and their ancestors were of Iberian extraction, and each was short and stocky just like Morcilla.

Gerald concluded that no amount of dieting and exercise could trump the Mediterranean DNA determining the size and shape of his wife's body. When he met Morcilla years earlier while each attended Carnegie Mellon University, she had a pretty face and big tits with silver dollar nipples – Morgan dollars, not those cheap, unimpressive Susan B. Anthonys. He would learn later that big tits are a harbinger of a wide ass and chunky thighs. But she had money. Plenty.

After his father died when he was eighteen, Gerald had become increasingly fixated on money and the accumulation of it. This drive represented a 180 degree turnabout from a time when Gerald generally disdained money and wealthy people – a sentiment common among the nonwealthy. In his third year at the School of Architecture, Gerald noted that money is no different than any vital organ – necessary for life. He soon came to believe too much is not enough.

Morcilla's family was fabulously wealthy. Gerald discovered the true enormity of Morcilla's wealth the day her father – the fifth-generation president of an international trading conglomerate – invited Gerald to join the Calatrava family to watch the Steelers play Tampa Bay. Gerald wasn't a huge football fan but he knew the Steelers weren't playing in Pittsburgh that weekend. He figured Morcilla's father had made a mistake. Morcilla informed Gerald that her father, an avid pilot, would be flying everyone to Tampa in his firm's private Gulfstream to watch the game from seats on the fifty-yard line. Up to that point, the handful of rich people with whom Gerald was familiar drove Mercedes-Benzes and flew first class to swell places like Orlando and Myrtle Beach. Morcilla's parents totally recalibrated the terms for him. They owned houses in Greenwich, Connecticut, St. Croix, Pittsburgh and Telluride. The showcase though was a marvelous home in Barcelona designed by the master Art Nouveau architect Antoni Gaudí. Sergio Calatrava, Morcilla's great-grandfather maintained a

business relationship with Josep Batlló, a major Spanish industrialist, and through him he made the acquaintance of Gaudí. Sergio commissioned a house that he christened Casa Calatrava. Gaudí adorned the four-story domicile with fancifully forged iron gates, balconies that appeared to be supported by bones, and a roof decorated with bright multi-colored ceramics and fitted with a tower that resembled a head of garlic topped by a four-sided cross. Morcilla's family meticulously maintained Casa Calatrava and by the time the building was seventy-five years old it was co-owned by more than twenty cousins. Declaring the splintered ownership untidy, Morcilla's father bought everyone out and put the deed into the names of his three children: Morcilla, Carmesina and Jofre.

Before her eighteenth birthday Morcilla had already traveled to more than forty countries on five continents with her parents, and had photographs of herself taken with such luminaries as Bobby Kennedy, Paul and Linda McCartney, and Robert DeNiro during the filming of *The Deer Hunter*. She owned four horses and had been accomplished in the sport of show jumping in her adolescence until her weight became a bit of a problem on the more challenging gates. She spoke six languages fluently and performed classical music on a custom-made Steinway piano that cost more than Gerald's father made in an entire year as a traveling salesman for a pharmaceutical company. And unsurprisingly, Morcilla was a royal bitch. With time and practice, and backed by obscene wealth, Morcilla perfected the art of pushing peoples' buttons to extract whatever she desired, or simply to assert a form of domination over others. After twenty years there was no situation in which Gerald was invulnerable to her techniques.

After they were married Gerald made it clear to Morcilla that he wanted to start an architecture firm on his own terms, and insisted it should succeed or fail based on his management of the endeavor. Gerald

took special stock of the admonition of Machiavelli: “Those who solely by good fortune become princes from being private citizens have little trouble in rising, but much in keeping atop.” As he prepared to launch his firm Gerald made it clear that any money contributed by Morcilla to Pfalzgraf Associates would be paid back with interest. He sincerely thought at the time that he would have no need to borrow; he was highly confident that he could prevail without any assistance from Morcilla’s cash reserves. That all changed when Gerald lost out on several bid opportunities for a variety of different reasons: his company didn’t have enough experience, his company didn’t have quality references, his company’s design proposals sucked. After nine months without closing any serious business, Gerald quietly, even sheepishly – he hated himself afterwards – inserted the notion of financial assistance into a conversation with Morcilla, and that was that. She happily loaned Pfalzgraf Associates a large sum of money – that is to say she purchased indentured servitude – and asked her father to refer a number of his clients. No doubt, Gerald’s company survived the infant mortality phase solely on the strength of Morcilla’s cash infusions. In subsequent years, after establishing viable roots, Gerald’s company was able to stand on its own but Morcilla always had her hooks into the enterprise, even as Gerald strived for independence. He appreciated all the benefits that Morcilla’s money could secure, but Pfalzgraf Associates was the one thing he wanted to do on his own, and she made that difficult.

This morning Morcilla was completing final arrangements for a large dinner party at the Pfalzgraf residence on Fifth Avenue. She was in a particularly bitchy mood because the caterers, an outfit ostentatiously named L’Epicure, had made what Gerald considered a meaningless error on the availability of some kind of obscure meat that Morcilla insisted on serving. Morcilla was also livid over a lingering

disagreement with the general manager of the Ferrari dealership on Park Avenue. As Morcilla perceived it, the manager was trying to renege on a price quote for a 360 Modena in Rosso Corsa red, and playing games by adding new fees and charging for additional features. Morcilla could easily afford the increased costs – her financial holdings threw off more interest in a single business day – but nothing offended her more than a lowly clerk trying to extort a little bit extra from a transaction just because she could pay for it.

Morcilla was on the phone with her best friend Vicki, speaking through a headset so she could have her hands free to multitask. Multitasking. God, how Gerald hated the word as well as the people who ran amok with the practice. As Morcilla opened envelopes and read the contents, she informed Vicki, “If that frigging wop thinks he can coerce me into paying another ten thousand for floor mats and custom-fit luggage, he’s dreaming . . . Yes, ten K . . . Hang on a sec.” Morcilla flipped the microphone away from her mouth and called to her husband, “Gerald, did you make a donation to the Whitney? I hope you didn’t make a donation to the Whitney.” She tossed the letter from the Whitney Museum into a rare and ancient Etruscan urn she used for holding follow-up business correspondence. Gerald sat on the edge of the bed, head hung low, and muttered to himself: “Fuckin’ A.”

“Vicki, you still there? Yeah, sometimes I wonder where Gerald’s head is at. Anyway, one day this month I’ve got to go down to the Ferrari dealership and have it out with Signore Enzo . . . yeah, that’s what he calls himself. Pompous bidonista. He’s the general manager . . . right, you’re damned right. Egli si conformerà, o I si interrompe la coglioni.” Vicki laughed on the other end and Morcilla cackled like a hen.

Gerald walked into the living room and as Morcilla stood in silhouette in front of the window overlooking the Central Park Zoo,

the telephone headset deforming her hairdo, she looked to him a bit too much like Mrs. Potato-Head. She certainly did not cut a “bella figura,” and Gerald imagined Signore Enzo and his puny sales manager ridiculing her chunky, clunky physique behind her back. Just then, Gerald had another in a growing series of contemptuous feelings toward his wife of twenty years. It was happening more frequently starting from the day Gerald began his affair with Wren. Increasingly he wanted to be rid of Morcilla – just her, not her money. He thought once again of Machiavelli’s insight: “A son can bear with equanimity the loss of his father, but the loss of his inheritance may drive him to despair.”

Gerald envisioned Wren living with him in the classic eight – everything exactly the same, except his lovely young goddess in place of Morcilla. Wren was so much more delightful than Morcilla, and when holding his arm as they strolled the sidewalks of Manhattan she made Gerald look dashing. Some might have considered Wren a mere trophy girlfriend, a token purchased to enhance the image of the buyer. But Gerald saw it differently. The age gap, while good for his ego, was not a primary motivation behind his desire to be with her. He had genuinely fallen in love with Wren, his precious little bird, his source of adoration, his project.

While Gerald indulged in his fantasy of beginning a new life with Wren, he had been staring mindlessly toward the window right through his wife’s body. Morcilla turned toward him and noticed with annoyance the blank, semi-moronic expression on his face. “What are you staring at Gerald? Don’t you have something to do? The wine steward will be here any minute. Why don’t you go out and get a haircut?”

The abruptness of Morcilla’s inquisition shook Gerald out of his stupor and he retreated to his study to undertake further analysis of the Oscar situation. He pressed a button that automatically closed the blinds, cutting off the offending sunshine.

At 2 p.m. the doorman announced the arrival of six employees of L'Épicure, the catering firm hired by Morcilla to handle the culinary duties of this evening's party. Gerald sent the butler down to escort them up to the penthouse, and the moment the crew stepped into the entryway their sense of doom wafted across the foyer like a bad smell. The caterers obviously feared the inevitable encounter with Morcilla: each would be excoriated and eviscerated over L'Épicure's broken promise to procure a rare and special jamón ibérico de bellota from Jabugo in the Andalusian province of Huelva. The buyer simply had not been successful in locating a provider of the delicacy – essentially cured ham from acorn-fed pigs. Morcilla had already made it clear to the owner of the catering firm that she would have fired them for their incompetence had time permitted; in response, he offered to substitute jamón serrano, which only irritated Morcilla further. In the end, L'Épicure assigned an additional two people, no charge, to work the party and comped a case of cordials and sixty pounds of crustaceans.

The lead caterer introduced himself to Gerald who was just about to leave the house for several hours. The last place Gerald wanted to be during the final hours leading up to Morcilla's big party was anywhere near his wife as she obsessed over the final hours leading up to her big party. Gerald announced loudly to Morcilla who was talking on the phone in the library, the ridiculous headset positioned across the crown of her head mashing her hair, "Morcilla, the people from L'Éprosy are here. I'm going out for awhile." Gerald scooted out the

door before Morcilla could respond with a dose of guilt in an attempt to punish him for willful absenteeism.

Alone in his office, altogether alone on the eighteenth floor, Gerald sat pensively in his Brno chair, folding his ear in and out, deep in thought about how he might exploit Oscar's vulnerable position. Several years earlier, Gerald hired Oscar away from a competing New York architecture firm after the two met during a meeting of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Oscar had made a compelling argument for denying landmark status to a decrepit but important building in Alphabet City, and although Gerald completely disagreed with Oscar's rationale he sensed a ruthless element in the man's personality. The Commission, siding with Oscar and others, ultimately declined to designate the dilapidated yet charming old carriage house a landmark, freeing the owner to demolish the structure. The owner subsequently turned the site over to Gerald's competitor who assigned Oscar to lead the replacement project. On the site of the historic carriage house the owner erected a building, designed by Oscar and his team that looked remarkably like a gigantic mailbox – Oscar had even chosen to clad the building in a blue synthetic sheathing which made the comparison impossible to ignore. The only thing missing from the façade were the words "US Mail." A few were inspired but most were appalled. Those who were appalled noted that those who were inspired did not live anywhere near what detractors dubbed the "Avenue A Abomination." Neighbors posted flyers with a red slash through the letters AAA and the admonition "Never Again." And no less an architecture critic than Charles, Prince of Wales weighed in on the brouhaha proclaiming, "there is nothing more dreadful than imagination without taste."

Either way, inspirational or appalling, Gerald concluded Oscar would make a valuable addition to the Pfalzgraf Associates team. Gerald made a nice offer – salary boost, signing bonus, pre-loaded

401k – and Oscar accepted. He blended in seamlessly into Pfalzgraf Associates, quickly receiving a promotion to team leader. Still, over the ensuing years Gerald perceived weakness and malleability in Oscar, counterpoints to the cutthroat qualities he observed that day when Oscar was arguing in front of the Commission. He wondered now if Oscar possessed a latent killer instinct, for if he did it would make for a marvelous combination with his other personality flaws. Gerald could use a ruthless man with a killer instinct who also would allow himself to be molded; a man whose sense of right and wrong could be easily tampered with. Gerald considered Oscar for the role of hired killer, then he recalled a Pfalzgraf Associate's Christmas party a few years back where Oscar, thoroughly drunk and probably high, relayed the bits of a story about drugging a girl in a bar.

“Y’know w’I mean, Gerald? She was hot. Effin’ hot. But the cunt – oops, sorry – the girl, she treated me like I was unworthy, beneath her. Like a goddamn leper. Y’know w’I mean? . . . Bitch!” Oscar sat hunched forward in a big wingback chair holding a glass of scotch tenuously between his thumb and forefinger, resting his forearm on his knee and dangling the drink between his legs. Gerald just stared at Oscar, noticing how rheumy his eyes appeared. Oscar blathered on, “I got her back though. Hah! Oh yeah.” He smiled broadly as he prepared to deliver the tale’s big payoff. “A couple’a ludes in her bourbon’n coke and I tabled the turns on her. Big time. I treated her like she was the unworthy one. Y’know w’I mean?” He winked demonically. “Like the unworthy bitch she was. And the cunt di’n’t even remember any of it.” Oscar’s smile morphed into a sinister grin and he sat back hard into the wingback. “Not one fucking second of it. Not a fucking second.” Those were his last words before he passed out in the chair, spilling the remaining scotch into his lap.

Recalling that Christmas party, Gerald concluded Oscar would

not make a suitable assassin after all. Too little discipline. Still, Gerald didn't scratch Oscar from his stable of candidates who might be called upon to participate in a plot to eliminate Morcilla; he just couldn't use him to kill her outright. Gerald shut off the lights in his office and walked down the stairs to street level.

He had planned earlier in the week to get a haircut, but with Morcilla's admonition today to do exactly that he had second thoughts. If he went ahead with the cut he would appear to have submitted to her command, like an obedient lapdog; but if not he would contravene his own desire, which seemed an even greater affront to his sensibilities. In addition, he would have to wander around Morcilla's abominable party with an out-of-shape do – not that he cared about what her effete friends thought of his appearance, except that he did. *Shit*. He hailed a cab and directed the driver to Garanhir, an upscale salon employing professionals who knew how to treat Gerald's full head of straight, auburn hair – a vibrant, cursed tussle that if improperly shorn would burst into ridiculous towering cowlicks. Gerald maintained a high regard for Garanhir's expertise, especially after having endured in childhood a decade's worth of abusive asymmetric haircuts inflicted upon him by Monday-off union barbers whose primary styling implements were a straight-edge and a leather strop. He also appreciated that the name of the salon was not derived from a stupid hair pun; patronizing an establishment with a name like The Cutting Edge, Shear Heaven, or The Mane Attraction was out of the question.

Garanhir's androgynous salon manager informed Gerald that his favorite stylist, Female – a skinny Ziggy Stardust type who pronounced his name "fe-MAH-lay" – was on an extended vacation in Belize. Gerald marveled at how so many lower-middle class types in the twenty-first century took trips to exotic places that were out of reach a generation ago for all but the most privileged and savvy of travelers. When

Gerald was a kid, a serious family trip might involve driving forever in his father's company-issued station wagon to Thousand Islands or Indianapolis to watch the 500 in the relentless noise and humidity. Today, humping one's ass up to Xunantunich had become a commonplace weekend excursion for Starbuck's baristas and webmasters for third-rate artists.

When he learned that Female was roaming around in the jungle Gerald almost walked out of the salon. He decided instead to take a risk and submit his hair to Female's substitute, Robert – a small, pale man in his forties with long, slender fingers and a pencil moustache. The salon manager, a tall doughy man who looked remarkably like an old Joan Crawford pronounced the hairdresser's name "Ro-BARE." *Did everyone here insist on emphasizing an unlikely syllable in his name?*

Once seated in the barber chair, his locks in tangles following a soothing wash and conditioning, Gerald watched in the mirror as Robert flicked his hair back and forth, left and right, all the while lost deeply in thought. Robert then abruptly announced, "I think Monsieur would like it much better if his hair were parted on the right." Robert deftly separated Gerald's hair, bifurcating it perfectly just above his right eye and fashioning it against a grain that it had been trained to grow his whole life, except for the nine months when he sported a crew cut in the first grade. As he did this, Robert's hands resembled little doves flitting above Gerald's head. "You see, Monsieur Pfalzgraf, your nose leans ever-so-slightly to the right. We can achieve a better balance with a part on the right. Do you agree?" Before Gerald could comment, let alone evaluate, Robert added, "It is not conventional, but it can work for a man who is very self-confident."

Gerald agreed that the new style suited him well. He was both enthused and relieved by the prospect of making a change and getting out of a life-long rut he hadn't even noticed he'd been stuck in. He also

felt a powerful inclination to agree, for if he rejected the proposal he would essentially announce to Robert and the handful of other stylists and clients nearby that he lacked self-confidence. “Yes, you’re right. That would be a refreshing change. Let’s do it.”

The new haircut, a simple change really, not something radical like a mohawk or a blonde dye job, nevertheless brought Gerald great joy. He headed for Public Hair in the off-chance Wren was working. As he strolled the sidewalks, he was conscious of the breeze blowing in his face; forever, he would adjust his head slightly to the right to ensure his hair remained mostly in place. Now he had to fight the instinct, and adjust his head slightly left instead. Twenty steps away from the entrance to the Hair, Gerald heard a cacophony of thumps and grunts blaring from inside – a noxious piece by Notorious B.I.G. called “Niggas Bleed.” *Jesus, what noise.* As he walked into the empty, dark bar, Gerald spotted a male bartender absent-mindedly wiping glasses and admiring his biceps in the mirror. Repulsed by it all, he did an about-face and hailed a cab for home.

The cab left Gerald off in front of his building on Fifth and as he walked toward the front door, an obese man holding an unfolded street map like a broadsheet newspaper and dressed in khaki shorts, black socks and an imitation Izod polo shirt approached him. Gerald noted the logo on the shirt was not a crocodile but something more like a skink. In an upper-Midwest accent the man asked politely, “Pardon me sir, but mightcha tell me where the Guggenheim Museum is?”

Gerald pointed northward and said, “It’s about thirty blocks that-a-way. You can’t miss it – it’s the building that looks like a giant commode.” Gerald was not a big fan of Frank Lloyd Wright’s kooky spiral building, largely agreeing with Norman Mailer who remarked that it “shattered the mood of the neighborhood.” Years later Charles Gwathmey architected a boxy addition to the museum which was

erected in 1992 thus completing the ensemble: Fifth Avenue now hosted two juxtaposed buildings resembling a water tank behind a toilet bowl.

Back home, Gerald walked straight to the bedroom. Morcilla was practically bouncing off the walls, giving orders to and sharply upbraiding anyone who had the misfortune to enter into orbit around her. The failure of L'Épicure to procure jamón ibérico de bellota was only the first of its infractions. Morcilla disliked the arrangement of the Maine peekytoe crab with fuji apple, celery crème fraîche and hearts of palm. She complained that the Tai snapper ceviche with Persian cucumber smelled funny. And the frog leg and watercress velouté wasn't velouté-y enough. The wine steward came in for some grief as did Norma, the Pfalzgraf's live-in maid.

Gerald went to the bedroom, turned on the television and clicked through the channels. He watched a few minutes of some poker tournament – world series or some such event. It seemed as though each week the organizers of professional poker staged what they built up to be the ultimate contest of the year in which the same cast of characters vied for a pile of bundled cash and a bracelet – always a bracelet. Bored after watching three hands where every player folded to the big blind, Gerald switched to a channel broadcasting a PGA golf tournament. The leader board was filled with mostly unknown names so the network hammered the perpetual lead story – Tiger Woods. The amazing Woods was in the clubhouse only twelve strokes back and yet the announcers breathlessly claimed he still posed a threat on Sunday. *The bastard had almost missed the cut and he's still in contention?* The networks had learned a long time ago – Woods must be the lead subject of every tournament narrative or the viewers will tune out. Gerald shut off the TV anyway.

Moments later he was in the bathroom taking a shit and playing

“Find the Fossil” when Norma knocked on the door. “Mr. Pfalzgraf? Mrs. Pfalzgraf ask me to tell you to come out soon and talk to the wine man.” The interruption, from hired help no less, pissed Gerald off. He was about to admonish Norma in a very scalding way but decided against it. *What the hell for?* The maid, a delicate young immigrant of questionable legal status from Shushufindi was just obeying orders. He threw the previous Sunday’s New York Times Styles section onto the polished marble floor and with obvious annoyance in his voice replied, “Norma, go tell my wife that I’ll be out when I come out. And don’t knock on the door again – *déjame solo, ¿comprende?*” Gerald shook his head in amazement. *Bothered! By hired help for Christ’s sake! In the middle of taking a dump!* As he picked up the newspaper and rearranged the jostled pages back into their proper order and alignment, he mumbled, “I’ll bet John Jacob Astor never had his daily shit interrupted by servants . . . unless it was to have them wipe his ass for him.” Gerald flipped back to the page littered with photographs taken at recent society parties – gala fundraisers, awards ceremonies, debutante balls – and searched for a picture of Brooke Astor: wealthy doyenne of New York Society; wife of Vincent Astor, the long-dead chairman of *Newsweek* magazine and whose father went down with the *Titanic*; ancient, desiccated woman who favored enormous brimmed hats that made her look like a thumbtack; and the “fossil” in the game of “Find the Fossil.” Gerald marveled at how often Mrs. Astor appeared in this part of the Style section, and he invented a little parlor game around it in which he hunted for her image. Sometimes Mrs. Astor appeared in photos taken at more than one event. Gerald enjoyed the game so much he now turned straight for the Style section first, even preferring it to the Week in Review. Sure as shit, there she was. *Astounding.* Holding onto David Rockefeller – no spring chicken himself – by the crook of his arm, looking confused in the gloaming of the onset of

Alzheimer's, on their way into Cipriani's for a fund-raiser in support of the Fresh Air Fund. Satisfied that the centenarian Mrs. Astor had lived to attend yet another posh fête, Gerald folded the paper, stuffed it into the obelisk-shaped trash can, wiped his ass, and stepped into the shower. *Fuck the wine man – he can wait.*

The first guests arrived slightly past 8 p.m. – Trevor and Dodo Cholmondelay, art collectors from Westchester by way of South Africa – followed soon after by scores of others who, Gerald surmised, had waited in their limos eyeing the entrance to his building until they spotted some other couple breaking the ice by being the first, and therefore the most pitiful guests. Within forty-five minutes the Pfalzgraf residence was overrun by almost eighty people – not counting the six caterers, four jazz musicians, the wine steward, the photographer, and the live-in help – the vast majority of them acquaintances and colleagues of Morcilla. The place was like a beehive. Gerald invited a few star-power clients of his firm, and no employees. Certainly no employees. He strived to conceal evidence of the true extent of his vast wealth from them. Nice suits and elegant watches were OK; a limo driver was OK; access to his opulent living quarters overlooking Central Park was out of the question. Even Wren was in the dark about his true financial stature.

Although many of Morcilla's guests might have been prime candidates to become new clients of Pfalzgraf Associates, Gerald resisted recruiting them. He disliked mixing business with pleasure, and hated even more the notion of tapping into Morcilla's stable of snobby elites. Such behavior would only deepen his indebtedness to her and reinforce Morcilla's belief that the firm's success depended wholly upon her.

On evenings like these – elaborate, expensive affairs arranged by

his wife as a prelude to extracting financial commitments (never call them “donations”) from her vast circle to support worthy causes; affairs that seemed to appear on Gerald’s calendar with greater frequency – he struggled to play the engaging host. He tried not to be the arrogant type who wears his disdain for his spouse’s interests on his sleeve so that even the most oblivious notice it. Quite the opposite: Gerald put forth a valiant effort to be a gracious co-host for these abhorrent parties. Therefore, Gerald was extremely frosted after Morcilla pulled him aside into their safe room – an ironclad space built into the center of the house per Gerald’s instructions where he, and Morcilla if absolutely necessary, could hole up in case of a home invasion or terrorist attack – to bitch him out for what she claimed was a snub toward Chappy Hardwick.

“You’re out of your mind, Morcilla. I never snubbed Chapstick. You know him – sensitive peter-puffer that he is. I simply stepped away for a second because that asshole wine steward you hired can’t make a decision.”

Chappy Hardwick was one of Morcilla’s dearest friends: a consistent contributor to the causes she championed, a patron of young artists, and a wealthy bon vivant connected to old-moneyed Virginia. He had amassed a voluminous collection of works by dozens of artists who started out young and impoverished, working in dank studios and inside storage units in the underbelly of New York City, some of whom later went on to become well-established members of the art scene receiving accolades from critics and gallery owners alike. Chappy was an astute collector who had a keen eye for talent; he was a barometer for other collectors in the New York art world, and an arbiter of trends. He also reaped obscene returns on his investments by purchasing with whatever petty cash he carried in his wallet the output of unknown artists, and hoarding it all until he decided the time was

optimal to sell particulars of his collection at auction. Chappy's first sale of selected Keith Haring works acquired in the early 1980s – innumerable instances of Haring's simple line drawings of humans, dogs, dolphins and other creatures, each surrounded by the ubiquitous wavy lines suggesting fear, joy, angst, jubilation, agitation, animation, epiphany – added millions to his net worth after the graffiti artist died in 1990 of AIDS.

To anyone who had met him for ten seconds, it was clear Chappy was gay – a flaming middle-aged fag with a thing for twinks. He had a crude side and when drunk would retell the tales of fucking and sucking this or that semi-famous artist or art patron, never mentioning a name but providing sufficient detail so that any Manhattan art-insider could figure it out. He made Michael Musto look like Dr. Dobson. Behind his back Gerald referred to him as “Chapstick.”

Morcilla drilled in. “See – just now you called him ‘Chapstick.’ Goddammit, Gerald. That’s what he told me. He said you introduced him to one of your stupid clients as ‘Chapstick.’ Are you drunk or do you just want to embarrass me? Or both? Tell me, Gerald. I want to know.”

“Back off, Morcilla . . .”

“Meine Mutter erzählte mir nicht zu heiraten Sie.”

Gerald stared at her with anger evident in his eyes. Undeterred, Morcilla continued, “Straighten up, Gerald. Ich kann nicht sprechen Sie jetzt. Aufenthalt entfernt von meine Gäste. Understand? Stay away from my guests if you can’t behave better than a twelve-year-old.”

Morcilla stormed out of the safe room, leaving Gerald alone to steam about being dragooned over a silly incident involving the outlandish Chappy Hardwick. He tried to rewind his brain back to his brief encounter with the swishy character. Could he really have slipped and called the man “Chapstick” in front of another guest?

Had he drunk that many Bellinis? *Oh, who the fuck cares?* Gerald was pissed over Morcilla's dramatic accusations and her admonishments in German. When he first met Morcilla, Gerald marveled at her fluency with foreign languages; when she made some pithy, offhand remark in French or struck up a conversation in the native tongue of a Portuguese restaurant owner, he felt a sense of pride. *That's my girl – what a woman of the world.* Now he resented her departures from English – especially when she regurgitated German on him. It made him think of the repulsive concentration camp commandant in *Seven Beauties*. And the thought of the slovenly Shirley Stoler character compelled him to imagine her polar opposite – his beautiful, young, sexy goddess and her perfect jaw that must have been crafted by angels in heaven. He allowed his mind to drift further: *This goddess must become mine – absolutely, exclusively – and I shall do whatever it takes to make it so.*

Gerald smoothed his hair, forgetting at first that it was now parted on the right. He adjusted his tie, straightened and sniffed the rose affixed to his lapel through a tiny slit tailored there for this express purpose, and counted to sixty; then he walked calmly out of the safe room. He refashioned his expression from a balled-up scowl to something closer to that of a helpful shoe salesman. Gerald spoke civilly to the wine steward and the caterers, advising them on the general wishes of Mrs. Pfalzgraf. He recommended a few of Morcilla's favorite songs to the jazz quartet. Gerald switched from drinking Bellinis to ice water. He approached Chappy Hardwick and his lithe boyfriend Garth on the balcony and whispered an apology in Chappy's ear. Gerald detected the gentle aroma of lavender. By whispering in Chappy's ear instead of pulling him aside Gerald chose to give the impression of being a confidant, an insider, perhaps even a man of ambiguous sexual orientation. Garth's gaydar registered a modest blip in response to Gerald's fey

affectation. The idea was to defuse a potentially ugly tête-à-tête with the unpredictable, self-centered Chappy.

“Oh, Gerald, don’t be so silly. Puh-leeze! I know you, you kidder. Don’t think another thought about it, darling. You know, you look different. I can’t put my stinky finger on it, but there’s something . . .” Gerald smiled and let his eyelids fall to half-mast. Chappy put his arm around Gerald’s waist and asked, “Gerald, do you know Garth Barthelmes? I found dear Garth in a Mini-Storage building along the Westside Highway – actually *living* inside one of those dreadful storage units – working like a madman on his absolutely *marvelous* sculptures of grizzly murder scenes. Do you know he fashions the crime victims from dried goose droppings? I have more than thirty of Garth’s sculptures in my collection.”

Gerald pushed out his lower lip, arched his eyebrows and nodded rhythmically as though this impressed him. “Goose droppings, huh? Canadian? No shortage of that media, I imagine.”

“True, Gerald, so true,” Chappy responded. “Garth, dear, say hello to Gerald Pfalzgraf – your host for this evening’s fun and frivolity, architect extraordinaire, and Morcilla’s well-hung husband.” Chappy ran his tongue clockwise around his lips, cocked his head at Gerald’s crotch and laughed in a way that could have been taken to mean “I know from experience” or “it’s probably a lie Morcilla told me.”

Garth shook Gerald’s hand and laughed, and Gerald laughed too. But whereas Chappy and his boy-toy were enjoying the former’s remark about Gerald’s member, Gerald’s amusement was rooted in the satisfaction of knowing that this tribe of misfits that invaded his home, along with his depressing wife, would soon become nothing more than a scary memory, a fading remnant of a hideous dream from which he would awaken to find Wren sleeping peacefully next to him. Gerald found Chappy’s remark far from risible; still he displayed a

broad smile of perfectly straight, gleaming white teeth, knowing that his young goddess would be with him one day soon to provide comfort and companionship, and that with time he would make a full recovery. Gerald knew these things because he resolved to make them happen.

“Enjoy the evening, my friends. I have to mill around, but I’ll be back – I want to get your advice on decorating the new floor my company is going to be occupying. Maybe a goose-shit sculpture of a murder-suicide in the lobby.” Gerald smiled at the two fops and tossed them a lascivious wink before walking back inside. He thought to himself, *Jesus, what cretins*. Gerald recalled a similar cocktail party from a few years past when he caught Chappy in a guest room sitting on the edge of the bed, drunk as usual, in the dark, receiving fellatio from his boyfriend at the time, a pre-op transsexual with a bob haircut and pouty lips. That was the kind of guest Chappy was – completely inconsiderate of his host’s private spaces. Chappy quickly pulled the bed cover across his lap, while the boyfriend shrieked like a little girl and slid under the bed. Stunned, Gerald backed slowly out of the room as though he had stumbled upon his own parents *in flagrante delicto*. Later that evening, after Chappy and all the other guests departed, Gerald went back into the guest room, the scene of the gooey crime, to make the bed. He discovered on the floor next to the nightstand a packet of cocaine that apparently fell out of Chappy’s pants. Chappy never made a claim for it – perhaps he hadn’t even noticed it was missing. Gerald dipped into the hefty stash sometimes, especially when he was forced to spend long periods of time in Morcilla’s company. Strictly medicinal, he figured.

Back inside Gerald was approached by Dodo Cholmondelay seeking recommendations for a good building inspector – and by good, Gerald understood her to mean one who would look aside should a troubling structural flaw present itself. Just the sort of conversation topic he loathed. No sooner had he dropped the name of the most niggling, thorough, SOB inspector he could think of when her husband Trevor stepped into the conversation to let it be known that he had recently sold at auction an early example of Egon Schiele’s work – a small chalk study completed when Schiele attended the Kunstgewerbeschule in Vienna – for an \$810,500 profit. Gerald found it odd and pretentious for the man to be so exact in retelling the monetary gain. “Congratulations, Trevor. How *nice* for you,” replied Gerald, emphasizing the word “nice” so that Cholmondelay couldn’t be a hundred percent certain of Gerald’s true level of sincerity. When Morcilla first informed Gerald several years ago, right before another formal affair, that her new friends, the Cholmondelay’s, pronounce their sesquipedalian surname “Chumley,” he pegged them as ostentatious, vulgar, patricians. Trevor’s bald-faced attempt to impress Gerald and solicit kudos for his art collecting prowess became another nugget validating Gerald’s original sight-unseen assessment.

Shortly after 3 a.m., when the last guest, a totally-smashed Chappy Hardwick finally stumbled out of the penthouse, Gerald pulled off his tie, shook his head in amazement, and retired to his library. An hour earlier, Chappy had threatened to jump off the balcony after Garth stormed out following an embarrassing argument in which Chappy accused his boyfriend of hitting on one of Gerald’s clients, a solidly heterosexual industrialist from Dresden. The staid industrialist looked ashen, the guests fell silent, and Morcilla gazed upon the scene as though she were standing between the rails facing a high-balling

locomotive – frozen by inevitability. Chappy, in graphic detail, shouted out for all to hear that he had once caught Garth in his smelly storage unit attempting anal sex with a Canadian goose. He screamed defiantly, “I don’t have to prove that I am creative! All my pictures are confused!” Nobody knew what the hell he was talking about; Gerald wracked his brain as the obtuse declaration sounded vaguely familiar. The photographer Morcilla hired to take pictures for the society papers and her website set his camera to burst mode and snapped hundreds of images that would have made Weegee envious. Gerald spent twenty uncomfortable minutes talking Chappy away from the edge – Morcilla was too mortified to engage. In the end, Chappy threw up all over Morcilla’s custom made Steinway that she had instructed the butler to roll from the conservatory onto the balcony for the evening. Chappy slumped down onto the tiled surface, staring at his feet and apologizing repeatedly in a low, soft voice.

Morcilla came into the library and sat on the floor next to Gerald who had been trying to unwind by finishing off the Op-Ed page from the previous Sunday. “That was the most awful thing I have ever witnessed. What a disaster. I’ll probably have to get a gag order on the photographer to keep him from publishing his pictures in the Post. I guess it’s true: mensch tracht, Gott lacht. Anyway, I really appreciate your help on Chappy’s meltdown, Gerald.” She touched his hand, and for the first time in a long time Gerald felt some compassion toward his wife. Then she added, “Still, I can’t understand why you didn’t intervene before things got out of hand. Didn’t you notice Chappy was getting really drunk and that Garth was being awfully chummy with your German client? Is he gay?”

Morcilla’s inquisitions caught Gerald off-guard, and he was angry at himself for allowing an iota of compassion for Morcilla to invade his

psyche. He felt like Charlie Brown after trying once more in vain to kick the football from Lucy's clutches. "What are you getting at, Morcilla? Those freaks are your friends, not mine. I didn't invite Chapstick, and the Chumplies, and the rest of those mooches who graze like hogs at the trough on the expensive food you insist on serving them."

"Expensive? What would you know? You're blissfully ignorant when it comes to money."

"Go to bed, Morcilla."

"You should have done more to keep things under control, Gerald. You know I'm busy with the guests – you should have kept an eye on Chappy. Especially after you insulted him. You know he can be unpredictable."

"I should have let him jump off the balcony . . ."

"You're a bastard."

". . . and you should have followed after him."

Morcilla stood up and stormed out of the room. Gerald resumed reading Maureen Dowd's idiotic op-ed column but he merely stared at the words on the page as though it had been written in ancient Aramaic. He was too infuriated to comprehend anything. "Fucking whore," he mumbled to himself. Gerald felt dizzy; his blood pressure was elevated to discomfoting levels. He reclined on his vintage Le Corbusier LC4 chaise longue and massaged his temples. Through a narrow opening between the library door and the jamb, Gerald watched with contempt as Morcilla powered up her laptop – a standard procedure following every social event in which she logged the evening's highlights. Who spoke to whom; who wore what; which guests seemed on the up and which seemed on the decline; what artists and performers were poised to pop and which were yesterday's news. This entire load of trivia would be documented into an elaborate Brio spreadsheet that was set

up by an IT specialist on Morcilla's payroll who also maintained her website and blog.

Gerald repeated himself: "Fucking whore." A half hour later, he fell into an unsatisfying, fitful sleep clogged with disturbing, violent dreams. Right before he dismembered Morcilla's limp body, searching for a place to discard the chunky, unwieldy torso, he woke up sweating. "Whoa – that was too realistic." He took a long, painful piss, swallowed four aspirins along with a quart of orange juice, returned to the library and sprawled out on the carpet. He desperately tried to resume sleeping before the insidious sunshine penetrated his windows and bored a hole in his cranium.

The vice-president in charge of corporate loans for Tacoma-Narrows National Bank met Gerald in the lobby and escorted him and Martina Riehl to the conference room on the second floor. Gerald was here with Martina, his CFO, to arrange financing to expand Pfalzgraf Associates' office space into the seventeenth floor of the building, and for a spec house the firm planned to build in a sylvan area outside Philadelphia. As before, Bauhaus principles would dictate the design of the spec house – up to a point. Gerald knew from experience that adherence to pure theory would result in a place no one would want to live in. The main house would consist of several glass and steel boxes – including a complex parallelepiped construct – supported by pilings, interconnected in multiple tiers. One cube – a library, perhaps, or a study – would be cantilevered out over a cliff looking down a valley onto a green meadow overrun by wild yellow and violet flowers. Gerald's team would design integrated furniture constructed of custom-welded stainless steel adorned with expensive red leather cushions. A single chair would cost more than \$5,000. For the sake of livability, Bourgeois interior amenities – useless adornments, really – would be included to keep the place from looking too much like a factory or a prison, no doubt causing Walter Gropius and his rigid, austere German acolytes to roll over in their graves.

Like every other meeting between Pfalzgraf Associates and the bank's vice-president, this one was merely a formality. Morcilla had more than \$20 million invested with Tacoma-Narrows and if Gerald, festooned in a KKK robe, had come in for a loan to purchase a thousand

flammable crosses he would get it with the best possible terms, along with a compliment for his tailor.

On his way out the bank Gerald spotted someone who looked like an old acquaintance from Aliquippa. The man was engaged in a conversation with a low-level loan officer. From a distance it appeared the conversation was not going well. Dressed in cheap, dusty jeans, a blue work shirt and a Caterpillar hat, the man who Gerald now believed to be a classmate from grade school sat hunched over in a beautiful yet uncomfortable-looking lime-green chair. Gerald thought it was a Ravello, a stylish piece of furniture designed by Oscar Niemeyer and Ricardo Antonio. In profile, the back and seat of the chair came together so as to look like the wings of the birds depicted in Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows* painted the same month the artist committed suicide. The Ravello chair reminded Gerald of a fantastic afternoon he spent with Wren months earlier in SoHo, and he allowed his mind to wander back to the details of that day . . .

The couple watched two Luis Buñuel classics back-to-back – *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age D'Or* – at the Angelica, drank shots and beers in the thick, blue air of a Prohibition-era bar that had so far defied the advancement of SoHo gentrification (and of New York City's laws prohibiting smoking indoors), and then visited an art gallery showcasing an exhibition of large, Cibachrome photos depicting nude, full-bodied black women posing erotically in large glass vats filled with milk. The subjects in the photos pressed their breasts and bellies and thighs and ample asses against the glass walls of the vat, creating a seminal scene. Both Wren and Gerald found the material strangely erotic, and in a moment of impulse the two, unnoticed by the only other person in the gallery, a receptionist, snuck quietly behind an elevator shaft and made love in haste, standing against a gray wall mottled with nail holes. Wren faced the wall and hiked up her short,

pleated skirt. Before she could pull down her panties Gerald ripped them with his left hand and guided his cock with his right. He pressed his body tight against Wren's and placed his head on her left shoulder; Wren nearly climaxed when she smelled the heavy aroma of bourbon on Gerald's breath. Afterward, as if nothing extraordinary had just happened, the couple strolled down Wooster Street arm-in-arm under an umbrella in the pouring rain past the Poltrona Frau store where several Ravello chairs were displayed, each covered in leathers dyed in varying vibrant colors. Stopping to observe the abstract avian profile of the chairs as the rainwater ran down the sewer like a cascade, Wren said, "By shallow rivers to whose falls, melodious birds sing madrigals." Gerald put his hands on Wren's waist and drew her close. She dropped the umbrella. He looked deep into her eyes and responded after a moment, "Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?"

That afternoon was one of Gerald's all time top ten.

It took Gerald several seconds to identify the man sitting bent over in the Ravello chair as Tom Stull. Gerald went to grade school with Tom for six or seven years back in Western Pennsylvania. Tom had been a mountain kid whose parents exercised minimal restraint over him and his brothers. With his father's help Tom built a mini-bike from a lawn-mower engine, and rode it at top speed along the railroad tracks and deep into the forest across rutted, muddy paths. He went hunting in the woods nearby for deer and bear with his father and older brothers. He bragged about having banged a high-school sophomore when he was eleven. Tom was the polar opposite of young Gerald who lived a mostly safe suburban life and was not allowed to have a girlfriend or even to own a BB gun. As a teenager Gerald became a critic of hunting, but deep down it was all sour grapes. He would have preferred it if his father had been more like Tom's and taken him

hunting, and fishing, and to baseball games, and had taught him to play poker, and had done any one of a thousand other things that didn't fit into the schedule of a busy, traveling pharmaceutical sales rep.

Gerald seemed to recall hearing at a class reunion that Tom Stull had enlisted in the Army and later started a small contracting business. *What was he doing in New York City?* Tom got up from the stylish but crippling chair, grabbed his lower back, shook hands with the loan officer and started to walk out the bank.

"Tom? Tom Stull? How are you?" Waiting for recognition that did not come instantly, Gerald added quickly, "It's Gerald Pfalzgraf."

Tom hesitated a second. "Gerald? Jesus, how are you? You're looking good." The two shook hands. Tom turned toward Martina, extended his hand, and said, "I'm Tom Stull. You must be Gerald's wife."

Before she could answer, Gerald responded for her, "No, this is Martina, Martina Riehl – she works for me. What are you doing here?" Martina, sizing up Tom and deciding nothing of business value would be discussed, indicated she would wait outside, and walked briskly to the sidewalk to light up a cigarette. Tom's first thought was whether Gerald might be screwing his comely employee – she was certainly tempting.

Gerald silently watched Martina walk away until she was outside, then continued with Tom, "What are you doing in New York?"

"I moved to Jersey recently. I got a long-term contract to do some pavement resurfacing on I80, so I set up a temporary office in Jersey. My wife Tori is still living back in Donora, at least for now. I hardly ever see her these days. I'm working twenty-four by seven. It's a brutal world out there." As he said it, Tom looked over Gerald and his well-appointed attire and his \$200 haircut, and smirked slightly as if to say "present company excluded."

Gerald knew Donora well – every grade school student in Western Pennsylvania was taught about the Donora Smog Disaster of 1948 in which twenty people died and several thousand were sickened when a temperature inversion trapped air polluted with sulfur dioxide in the valley in which the town was situated. Donora: home of America’s worst air pollution disaster – what a claim to fame. Gerald was certain of the inevitability that the town elders would one day erect a smog museum. Why not – the sites of yesterday’s trials and tribulations are today’s amusement parks.

Gerald responded, “Donora, huh? Nice. So how’s business?” He coughed slightly after the word “nice,” but Tom didn’t take the bait.

“Business is fucking great.” The sarcastic way Tom spat out “fucking” Gerald could tell his business sucked. “Except for this fucking bank – they always loan me money whenever I need it, and I always pay them on time – mostly on time anyway. But now they’ve jacked up the interest rates and they’re calling for more collateral from me, which I ain’t got. I came here to get an extension before they repossess some of my paving equipment, which would basically wipe me out – not right away, but soon enough.”

Among Gerald’s first reactions was to make a mental note to consider the ways Tom’s precarious financial situation might be exploited for his own benefit. He wasn’t proud of it, but it was this form of selfish reasoning that had served Gerald well throughout his life. Many of his fellow architect students from CMU – honest, hard-working fellows who had never considered taking advantage of another person – had wound up working in the business as CAD flunkies inside big firms, or even worse, had become landscape architects contracted out to whiny Yuppie clients. They were forced to hold their noses and supervise illegal day laborers executing the mundane tasks of positioning rocks and saplings around huge, garish houses and

swimming pools built to resemble hidden grottos. Gerald did not want to trudge through a life-long career like an amiable automaton. In his view, how well a person succeeded in his chosen field was the only metric that truly mattered; the means by which a person reached a station in life were largely irrelevant.

“That’s pretty fucked up,” said Gerald, who rarely used the word “fuck” or any of its derivatives or extensions in conversation. Speaking to a dust-covered man wearing a Caterpillar hat, however, has a way of coarsening one’s choice of adjectives and modifiers. “Give me your card. Maybe we can have lunch and catch up on old times.”

Tom didn’t believe there were any old times to catch up on, but like Gerald he also hoped to exploit an opportunity. Cultivating a relationship with an obviously rich bastard like Gerald might lead to a way out of Tom’s financial troubles.

“Sure – here’s my card. Give me a call.” He handed over a worn, creased business card that had a barely perceptible circular imprint from being pressed against the condom he kept in his wallet. The name of his company, “TS Erection” was printed, not embossed, on the card along with a bunch of phone numbers, a cheap-looking drawing of a crane, and an email ID: tomstull@ts-erection.com. Gerald took the card and smirked at the name. *Jesus, how much email sent by TS Erection to customers and prospects wound up in their spam folders?*

“OK Tom – be good.” Gerald met up with Martina and they climbed into the waiting limo, the rear door attended to by a snappy-looking, uniformed Arab man; Tom walked to the B train, holding under his arm a manila folder bursting with papers.

After dropping Martina off at the office, Gerald's Arab chauffeur drove him to Pastis in the Meatpacking District to meet Morcilla for lunch. Years earlier Morcilla had made a small speculative real estate investment in the district when it was occupied principally by rough gay bars, pornography stores and purveyors of wholesale steaks, ribs, chops and other cuts sliced of out carcasses shipped in from the slaughterhouses of the Midwest. The district supplied quality meats to most of the finest restaurants in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Now, like SoHo and Tribeca before it, the Meatpacking District was fast becoming a desired location for trendy stores, upscale restaurants and pricey condos, although some meat packers continued to hold out in the face of rampant gentrification to carry on their trade. A tourist visiting the Meatpacking District might find it surreal and a bit nauseating to step out the door of a stylish steel-and-glass boutique staffed by impossibly-tall Milanese models hawking \$800 Helmut Lang jeans onto a bloody sidewalk that smelled of organs and rendered fat, and where crowds of squat men in soiled coveralls maneuvered cattle carcasses hung from hooks on overhead rails.

The property Morcilla bought for less than \$2 million – a distressed but elegant nineteenth century four-story building with sixteen foot ceilings, loading docks and a massive freight elevator that once served as a dark meeting place for the leather-clad homosexuals who patronized the nearby Ramrod bar – was now appraised at \$26 million. She was debating whether to sell it or plow more money into developing it into luxury apartments. The building was situated around the corner from Pastis, a French bistro specializing in licorice-flavored apéritifs and mayonnaise-drenched pommes frites. An early encroacher into the district, Pastis was popular among the fabulous – so popular that when Gerald arrived for lunch he had to wait in his limo ten minutes for the

other limos ahead of him to disgorge their occupants and pull away from the entrance.

Morcilla was already inside sitting alone at a zinc top table, an \$18 glass of Pouilly-Fuissé positioned in front of her next to an open tablet filled with notes she had organized into an orderly list, each item preceded by a big dot that marketing types referred to as a “bullet.” She was speaking on her cell through a microphone that hung along a wire leading from her ear canal when Gerald walked through the front door of the restaurant. He was a few minutes late and he knew Morcilla would give him some shit; the quantity and severity would depend upon how her conversation was progressing. Just as he reached the table Gerald heard Morcilla close her call by saying, “if that’s how you feel about it, you give me no choice. Credo che lei vorrà riconsiderare la vostra posizione. Ciao.” Placing the phone on the table, she muttered to herself, “Goddamn it,” then with a look of frustration toward her husband, “Gerald, you’re late. Where have you been?” She took a big gulp of wine.

“Nice to see you too, dear.”

“Don’t be cute. How did your meeting go with the bankers?”

“Fine. I ran into . . .”

“When will they green-light the financing?”

There was very little that irritated Gerald more than being interrupted while speaking, so he turned away from Morcilla, scanned the room to identify the youngest, sexiest waitress and signaled for her to come to the table. With a flirty smile Gerald requested a glass of Château de Valflaunès. And he made sure Morcilla saw him toss her a playful wink.

As the waitress walked away, Gerald abruptly dispatched the smile from his face and reported to Morcilla matter-of-factly, “I expect to

hear back from the bank tomorrow. Who were you talking to just now – that Ferrari asshole? Or the illustrious Mr. Hard-On, perhaps?”

Morcilla glowered at Gerald. “Signore Enzo, yes. That Ferrari asshole. I’ll be raining a shitstorm down upon him as soon as I can get a spare minute to go over to the showroom. My schedule has gotten out of control.”

“Why don’t you just tell him to go to hell, Morcilla? What do you need the car for anyway? Is there something wrong with the Bentley?”

Morcilla quickly finished her wine just in time to order another Pouilly-Fuissé from the young, sexy waitress who arrived with Gerald’s glass of rosé. Without looking at the waitress Morcilla directed a question to her, “*Quel-ce qu'est le plat du jour aujourd'hui?*”

“*Moules Frites Au Pernod, Madame.*”

“*Hmm . . . Non, je ne veux pas que. Petatou de Fromage de Chèvre chaud, s'il vous plait.*” Then to Gerald, “What are you having, Gerald?”

Having had no opportunity to study the menu, yet familiar with most of the items listed on it from the time he brought Wren to Pastis following a Sandra Bernhard show at the Jane Street Theater, he replied, “Steak tartare and a salad.”

“Oh, Gerald, are you really going to have that?” whined Morcilla, her nose turned up in disgust at the thought of consuming raw beef. Gerald handed the unopened menu back to the waitress with an expression that telegraphed “as you can see, my wife here is a pain in the ass, but it’s a cross I must bear.” The waitress responded with a wan smile and the sad eyes of understanding, and retreated to the bar to put in the orders.

“Honestly, Gerald, sometimes I think you do the most disgusting things just to annoy me,” Morcilla said. Gerald tasted his wine.

“As I always say: When in the Meatpacking District, pack meat.”

Morcilla shook her head. A few beats later, she said, “And no, there’s nothing wrong with the Bentley, as if it’s any of your concern. I simply like the Modena, and I can afford it – even after propping up your company – so that’s that.”

Gerald abruptly stopped drinking and scowled at Morcilla as he placed his drink on the table with concentrated care – a move made to help him control his anger. Morcilla knew immediately after saying the words “propping up your company” that she had touched a raw nerve, and anticipating some form of protest from Gerald, said preemptively, “I’m sorry, Gerald. You’re doing a great job. Forgive me. I have a lot on my mind with the building, and the charity ball, and now this goddamned car dealer. I’m proud of the work you’re doing. Really.” She reached to touch Gerald’s hand but he quickly grasped the stem of his wine glass and lifted it to his lips.

“Forget it,” Gerald said calmly, seething inside about Morcilla’s suggestion that her generosity and influence were essential to Pfalzgraf Associates’ survival – not because it was false, but because it was mostly true. And by capping off her apology by saying she was proud of him, Morcilla further angered Gerald who felt like she was treating him as his mother had when he became a Webelo at age eleven.

To make a point that his company was continuing on a path to prosperity, and to push back on Morcilla a bit, Gerald prepared to discuss some potentially good news. “I’m going to be meeting with David Arbogast about a commission for a . . .”

“You spoke to David? When?” Morcilla asked with some surprise.

“Last week. If we get the contract – it’s a commission for a private museum on his compound – it will really establish the firm. You won’t have to prop us up anymore.”

“David didn’t mention it to me.”

Gerald narrowed his eyes. “Why would he?” A student of

Machiavelli, Gerald was innately suspicious of adversaries – and that was how he was beginning to perceive Morcilla.

The waitress arrived tableside carrying a round tray the size of a manhole cover. Morcilla sat up, and if she had planned to respond to Gerald, she remained silent instead. The waitress placed a fancy-looking cheese sandwich and fries in front of Morcilla, and to Gerald she presented what was essentially a small meatloaf that most people would proceed to put in the oven. A raw egg glistened atop the loaf, resting in an indentation.

“Voulez-vous quelque chose de plus?”

Morcilla shook her head and crammed several pommes frites into her mouth. The waitress wished the couple “Bon appetite,” and left with the manhole cover. Gerald mashed the raw egg into the ground beef. To annoy Morcilla he took a big, sloppy bite, causing reddish egg yolk to ooze from the corner of his mouth. Morcilla gagged at the sight and got up to go to the W.C.

While she was gone, Gerald wolfed down the steak tartare, deciding not to prolong the assault on his wife’s senses. After several minutes, Morcilla returned and said flatly, “I hope David gives you the commission, Gerald. I’ve decided to turn my building on Little West 12th into condos and reconfigure the ground floor into retail space. The initial cost estimate is fifty mil, so I won’t be able to funnel any more cash your way for awhile.”

On the way back to the office, sitting alone in the spacious back seat of the limo and contemplating his conversation with Morcilla, Gerald felt the abrupt arrival of some serious discomfort in his stomach. He buzzed the driver to pull over. Gerald stumbled out of the limo, walked into Union Square Park to get some fresh air, and succumbed to head-spinning nausea. He vomited a half-pound of greasy meat at

the feet of a statue of Mahatma Gandhi. Not one person in the vicinity acknowledged Gerald and his hideous retching.

Back in the limo, sweaty and pale, throat burning, Gerald worried that the raw beef might have been laced with salmonella or some other egregious infection, but at the same time he couldn't rule out as the cause of his sickness the apprehension of learning of Morcilla's plan to divert massive funds into a multi-year renovation project.

Gerald croaked weakly, "Mustapha, forget the office. Take me home instead."

Gerald finished his call at 6:30 with the vice-president in charge of corporate loans, and hung up the phone. Tacoma-Narrows approved the loan – no shit. Gerald packed up his things into his brown leather Ghurka bag and left behind several junior architects to work on the grunty details of the Philadelphia spec house. He felt a hundred times better than he had the previous day when he sprayed steak tartare at the base of a statue memorializing the world’s foremost vegetarian. He walked down the two hundred fifty steps into the crisp evening air, on his way across the several blocks to Public Hair. Wren was there looking gorgeous. Gerald felt artistic this evening so he ordered a Gibson.

The first words out of her mouth: “I love your new hair style, Ger. It really complements your face somehow.” Just then it occurred to him – he had known Morcilla for a quarter of a century and she hadn’t even noticed the change. That’s how disconnected the two had become. In contrast, Wren recognized the new haircut immediately.

“Wren, can you get away this weekend?” Gerald wanted nothing more than to spend a long weekend with his young lover. She glanced around as she fished out a few cocktail onions from the bottom of the slimy jar. “Maybe, Mr. Pfalzgraf. What did you have in mind?”

“How about Charleston? The Spoleto Festival is going on this week.” He concentrated as he spoke so as not to pronounce the name as the locals did, rhyming it with Play-Doh.

“We would have to be back before Tuesday morning, I have to work a double shift.”

“Sure thing, doll,” Gerald replied.

Friday morning, Gerald kissed Morcilla goodbye on her forehead and said he wished she could have gotten away with him to Charleston, knowing full well she was committed to attending a fund-raiser for the Children's Zoo in Central Park. Gerald had concocted a novella about how the firm was looking to expand into growth market segments, and how Charleston had a strong profit profile, and how he needed to cultivate relationships there, and so on. The story was so elaborate and logical he concluded the tale had merit in real life. *Maybe Charleston would be a great locale for a branch office of Pfalzgraf Associates.*

Gerald met Wren outside Madison Square Garden around 10 a.m. She was holding a place along Eighth Avenue in a proletariat taxi line of downtrodden commuters, several pulling luggage with built in handles and little plastic wheels, glancing at their wristwatches every thirty seconds. Taking the limo was out of the question – Mustapha was a competent driver but Gerald harbored no illusions that the man would be discrete. The couple took a sweetly smelly cab to LaGuardia driven by a Sikh wearing a dastar and a Bluetooth appendage in his ear, yakking non-stop the whole trip with relatives in India– except during the descent into the Queens Midtown Tunnel where signals go to die.

Wren broke a long silence, “I wonder what language that is. Hindi, maybe. Or Urdu?”

“I think it's Punjabi,” Gerald replied nonchalantly and with an air of certitude because he had heard the driver mention the big city of Punjab. “And all his bullshitting on the cell back home with the fifty people in his immediate family – that's called Punjabbering.” Wren rolled her eyes, looked out the window at the grimy walls of the tunnel, and grinned broadly, showing off her brilliant white New

England milk-fed teeth, not a single one out of alignment or misshapen or flawed in any way.

The flight was a brief ninety minutes, although because of excessive air traffic in New York it arrived at the gate in Charleston an hour late which meant it was on time; Gerald figured anytime the delay is less than the scheduled duration of the flight, the trip can be declared a success. The plane was loaded with Spoleto Festival-goers chatting up each other about their itineraries, the experienced attendees proudly sharing their accumulated wisdom with the first-timers.

Gerald was not the kind of tourist who feels driven to occupy every waking minute coming and going and doing and seeing, crest-fallen if he misses out on a single activity. In fact, he was the kind of tourist who doesn't consider himself a tourist. Gerald had a knack for appearing to be a local within the first few hours of arrival, regardless of where he went. Wren followed Gerald's lead and soon the couple appeared as though they had lived in historic Charleston for years. More than a few times packs of blue-hairs surrounded Wren and asked for directions, preferring to deal with a woman on the subject of deciphering street maps.

Gerald and Wren strolled along Pinckney and Society and Meeting Streets admiring the stately mansions and charming houses, most built in the early 1800s in the Federal style. To protect her perfect alabaster skin from the Carolinian sun she had on a wide-brimmed navy blue and white hat like those worn by wealthy society women attending the Kentucky Derby or the Travers Stakes at Saratoga in August. The couple walked along East Bay and onto South Battery, taking time out on a park bench, Gerald's arm around Wren's shoulder, to watch the tide go out of Charleston Harbor.

The Federal style with all its attention to detail, quality construction,

patriotic overtones and symmetric elegance appealed to Gerald and he was forced to admit to himself grudgingly that these grand residences were in many ways superior to the flat-roofed Bauhaus shoeboxes he designed for his arrogant, status-addled clients. Could a person really compare Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House or Philip Johnson's Glass House to the likes of the Calhoun Mansion, the Edmondston-Alston House, or the Heyward-Washington House built in 1772?

As they strolled past the mansion at 87 Church Street, Gerald remarked, "I read that Thomas Heyward was an original signer of the Declaration of Independence and that George Washington slept here. Damn, I think the only person who slept around in more places than Washington was John Holmes."

"Who?"

"Never mind."

"I wonder if Thomas Heyward was a relative of DuBose Heyward."

"Who?"

Wren explained, "DuBose Heyward. He wrote *Porgy and Bess* which was set right here in Charleston. We studied it in my African-American film class last semester. I did an extra-credit project for my professor comparing 'Sportin' Life' to the Harvey Keitel character 'Sport' in *Taxi Driver*." Gerald smiled and nodded, modestly impressed and certainly delighted his investment in Wren's NYU tuition wasn't going to waste. She added, "Danny thought my report was very well researched."

"Danny? Who's Danny?" asked Gerald with a distinct hint of anxiety in his voice.

"My cinema professor. He gave me an A+ on the project paper which pushed me up to an overall A in the course. Danny was very instructive. He and I watched *Porgy and Bess* and *Taxi Driver* together

in the NYU screening room so he could help me understand how both characters are developed in the films.”

“You call your professor ‘Danny?’”

Gerald remembered a scene in *Taxi Driver* where the pimp Sport deceptively assures the young prostitute Iris that she is the favorite in his stable, and by doing so persuades Iris that he’s a caring individual – a bit like the way Gerald imagined Danny’s interaction with Wren. He pegged Danny to be phonier than an imitation Piltdown Man. Gerald suddenly felt oddly jealous and vulnerable, and his desire to secure Wren for himself increased markedly. In this state of mind he suggested, “Maybe you should consider taking a couple of elective courses, Wren. You know, check out another major to see if you like it better.” As soon as he said it, he regretted it, for it made him sound like a small man lacking in self-confidence – certainly not someone worthy of admiration. It took Gerald until dinnertime to shed the burlap sack of jealousy he had foolishly put on.

After dinner, sitting in the rooftop bar of the Market Pavilion Hotel under a starry sky with a commanding view of historic, romantic Charleston and the Cooper River Bridge which appeared to be suspended by delicate piano wire, Gerald asked Wren if she loved him. He might have declared straight-away, “I love you,” slapping his pride on the butcher block daring her to chop it with a cleaver. But right now he was beginning to seriously think about getting rid of Morcilla, and he had to know whether Wren was ready and willing to become the new Mrs. Pfalzgraf, eventually, under decidedly challenging circumstances. Her brief mention of Professor Danny still bothered him. He had to confirm with high confidence she was with him – otherwise, why bother going through with an elaborate, risky plan to eliminate the current Mrs. Pfalzgraf?

Wren took a sip from her Americano, a drink concocted with Campari that Gerald introduced her to, and at first she looked as though she might hem and haw. A warm breeze kicked up and blew the cocktail napkins off the table. Wren looked into Gerald's eyes and replied, "Yes I do . . . now what?" Gerald's penis got bent over in his underwear, bulging faster than he could adjust his trousers to accommodate the expansion. Hearing the response he had hoped for simultaneously elated and aroused him. Ecstatic, he exclaimed, "Now what? Let's go back to the Pinckney. I want to show you how much I love you, too, Wren."

As the couple walked arm-in-arm past the marketplace, back to their room in the old Andrew Pinckney Inn through the thick stench of horseshit and the even more foul-smelling cleanser applied to the street to eliminate the offensive odor, Gerald tried to remember where he placed Tom Stull's business card.

Elektra passionately sings, “Agamemnon, Agamemnon, Wo bist du, Vater?” recalling the murder of her father by his wife, her mother, Queen Klytemnestra. The scene is as powerful, the vocal challenges as technically difficult as Gerald had come to expect. Gerald was enjoying Strauss’s *Elektra* for the first time, and Wren, sitting next to him wearing the elegant Vera Wang dress he gave her, which complemented her even more elegant jawline, was seeing an opera for the first time.

The story is told in one act. Elektra seeks the death of the Queen, who is now married to Aegisth, to avenge her father. She tries to enlist the help of her sister Chrysothemis, but is rebuffed. Klytemnestra herself confides to Elektra that she is suffering from guilt and plagued by nightmares – nightmares about being hunted by her son Orest who is living in another town. Orest does return, and kills both Klytemnestra and Aegisth. Elektra is so overwhelmed with the satisfaction of knowing her father’s death has been avenged that she dances till she drops dead.

The opera is but one act because Strauss’s music is too demanding for the singers to endure any more of it, especially Elektra who is on stage for most of the opera and must sing eight B-flats and four high-Cs.

Following the morbid conclusion of *Elektra* and the lengthy ovation bestowed upon the cast by the Spoleto Festival audience, Gerald and Wren retreated to a quiet piano bar featuring a Brad Mehldau sound-alike. Wren raved about the opera like many first-timers do, dialing back on the enthusiasm a bit when she reminded herself negatively of

the Julia Roberts character in *Pretty Woman*. Gerald had other things on his mind. He had polished off a Gibson fairly quickly and was already working on his second.

"Y'know, Wrenny, I wonder if it's a common thing for people who kill their spouses to end up as guilt-ridden as Chlamydia?"

"I don't think that's her name, Ger. I know it's hard to pronounce but it certainly isn't Chlamydia. I think it's Klyt-something."

"Alright, Klytoris, Queen Klytoris, whatever. I would have thought that once the deed was done, a person in her exalted position would be able to move on, maintain composure, instead of cracking up. I'm pretty sure that if I were rid of Morcilla, I would be able to live with it. Especially with you there to take her place." He squeezed her thigh and flashed a devious smile.

Wren was simultaneously creeped-out and excited. What did Gerald mean to be 'rid of' his wife? Perhaps because she was not a cynic like Gerald she assumed he meant divorce, but could he be thinking of something more sinister, like murder? After all, the couple had just watched a tragic opera in which that act of violence was a central element of the plot. So she asked, trying to appear casual about it but sounding tentative, "What to you mean, 'rid of Morcilla'?"

Gerald sensed Wren was fishing for clarity. He looked deep into her eyes and quickly assessed her body language to determine her frame of mind and concluded she was unprepared, at least now and maybe forever, to absorb the notion of killing Morcilla. He said, "Get a divorce, as painful as that would be on my financials, with the pre-nup, and her Byzantine trust funds, and the loans she made to the firm. Why? What did you think I meant?"

"Well . . . I . . ."

"Y'know, Wren, I'm ready to do it, but I have to plan things carefully. Morcilla uses her money the way Vlad the Impaler used his . . .

uh, impaler.” Again he said, “I have to plan carefully.” Gerald took a long draw from his drink. “For all I know, Morcilla is plotting a palace coup against me right now. In times of peace, prepare for war, I say. It sounds Machiavellian, but I actually read that line on the wallpaper in my friend’s bathroom, and I thought ‘genius.’ They had this awful wallpaper – a pattern of old nineteenth century sepia newspaper ads. It was a slogan for a mosquito repellent, I think.”

Wren tried to process Gerald’s message. He seemed to be telegraphing a real desire to leave his wife to clear the way to marry her. How would that work?

Gerald plowed on. “What would you say if Morcilla was no longer my wife? Forget about how that might happen? Would you consider becoming my new and improved wife so we could spend all our time together, like this? You would love the view of Central Park from my penthouse. Our penthouse.” The combination of sudden passion and two quickly-consumed Gibsons colluded to make Gerald appear slightly deranged.

Wren said nothing for a long time, spinning the glass of her Americano by the stem – she really was fond of this drink – then, “Yes, I could imagine it . . . but I don’t want to talk about it now, not when you’re half-drunk. Let’s talk about it when we’re back in New York.”

“I’m not half-drunk, only 33 and a third percent drunk,” he said, failing to get the smiley response from Wren he expected. “OK. Back in New York.”

“Ger?”

“Yes?”

“I can also imagine the view of Central Park from your penthouse. Our penthouse.”

Gerald reluctantly rose early. He had over-indulged on Gibsons the previous evening and had been contorted through several positions of the Kama Sutra by Wren, including one that seemed designed for the inclusion of a second woman. He would have preferred to slumber for many more hours but he rolled out of bed anyway because he had booked an 8 a.m. tee time at the Ocean Course on Kiawah Island, host of the 1991 Ryder Cup tournament.

Raised in a scrappy town a mere seventy miles from Latrobe, the site of Arnold Palmer's home course, eight-year-old Gerald became very interested in golf, a game uniquely distinguished from the likes of hockey, bowling and football – sports commanding far greater participation by denizens of Western Pennsylvania. Those sports were played on standardized real estate: two hundred feet by eighty-five feet; sixty feet by thirty-nine inches; a hundred yards long, the so-called “length of a football field” often cited to illustrate the enormity of Boeing airplanes and supertankers steaming forth from the Persian Gulf. Golf on the other hand was played on a tract of land, unique in contour and character, from which nine to eighteen holes had been architected. No two courses in the world were alike. Gerald was drawn to the individuality of the game and the pressure to perform that it imparted on the player, a lone participant saddled with total responsibility, a man unaccompanied by a teammate to whom he can pass the burden, even momentarily.

Young Gerald chipped whiffle balls around the yard for hours, sometimes plopping them on the roof where they subsequently

collected in the gutter and became the source of leaf jams in the fall and winter months. By the time he was fifteen he had whipped his handicap down into single digits, but after turning sixteen and acquiring a driver's license, he mostly quit the game. Gerald played off and on in adulthood but a busy schedule and living in Manhattan significantly stifled his ability to get out on a steady basis. Still, having taken up the game at a young age he maintained a smooth, balanced golf swing and on any given day he might be able to break 80. Back in Vermont, Wren played high school softball and lacrosse. She had natural athletic poise. The time Gerald took Wren to the Chelsea Piers to drive golf balls into a net trussed up in front of the Hudson River he was sincerely impressed with her innate ability. She had an easy swing and sweet follow-through – and she routinely drove the ball two hundred yards down the middle. Gerald had no qualms about taking his lovely young goddess to play a challenging track like the Ocean Course.

When Wren, who played along with Gerald from the white tees and never for a moment appeared to be taking the game seriously, sank a fifteen foot put on the eighteenth hole to break 100 – and to beat both men who joined the two-some – Gerald applauded proudly. Earlier, Wren surprised Gerald by beating him on the very first hole, a relatively short par four, by carding a par to his embarrassing bogey – he had three-putted after sticking a nine-iron to twelve feet, whereas Wren drained a long undulating putt without so much as eyeing the contours of the green – and this indignation caused him to hunker down and get his game together. As a result of this self-imposed concentration he played quite well and on number 18 he tapped in for an 80. Even so, he was disappointed that he didn't score in the seventies – an achievement that he believed would have earned him some serious adoration from Wren and from the two goobers from Arkansas who played along with them.

The round took well over five hours so Gerald and Wren had to ditch the rented equipment and rush to the airport to catch the 4 o'clock flight back to New York. Once in the air Gerald complimented Wren on her performance on Kiawah. "You're a damn good golfer, Wren. I mean it. You should take a couple lessons – I bet you could be a single-digit handicapper someday." Wren smiled and shrugged, and said with Vermont-bred modesty, "Oh, I don't know about that."

Gerald added, "But in the game of love, doll, you're a scratch player – you nearly killed me last night. Where did you learn how to do that?"

Wren rolled her eyes, "Do you really think I'm going to answer that? Let's just say I have an active imagination, OK?"

"OK. I shall say no more."

Wren reached for Gerald's hand. "Obožavan te."

"Huh? What's that mean?" Wren shrugged again. "C'mon Wren, tell me – what's it mean. Sounds Slavic."

"It means 'I adore you.' And I mean it. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, Ger."

To hear Wren utter the words 'I adore you' put Gerald into the mesosphere. It took him a few beats to ask the next obvious questions: "What language is that? Where did you learn it?"

"From my ex-boyfriend. It's Serbian."

The plane hit some turbulence and the pilot flipped on the seatbelt sign. Gerald hated turbulence. Surely, he thought, in the twenty-first century it should be possible for a pilot to predict and avoid all forms of turbulence; therefore Gerald assumed the airlines would rather fly through turbulence and agitate their passengers than consume an extra few gallons of fuel flying around it.

"Geez, Wren, your ex-boyfriend? That doesn't make me feel too adored." He knew he sounded like a dick the moment he said it but he didn't care. Turbulence tended to nullify Gerald's defense mechanisms.

“I’m sorry Ger, but I do mean it. I do adore you.” Uncomfortable pause. “I guess I thought about it because I heard my ex-boyfriend say it.” Uncomfortable pause. “He’s . . . uh, Sinisa’s back in town. He left me a bunch of phone messages yesterday. He said ‘obožavan te’ a couple of times and it took me awhile to remember what it means. Anyway, don’t get panicky. Sinisa just wanted to see me to say hello, but there’s no way I’m going to meet him. That’s so over.”

“What the fuck? . . . I’m sorry. What’s going on, Wren? Is this guy going to become a problem for us?”

“No, Ger. Don’t worry, baby.” The plane abruptly dropped fifty feet; Gerald looked with trepidation at a 40,000 foot anvil-shaped thunderhead from his window. “I went out with him for awhile – you know – but it’s over now. Has been for a long time. He moved away from New York and I really hoped he wouldn’t come back, but he did. I can’t make him go away. I guess I should have known he would come back eventually given he never sold his apartment in Chelsea. But he’s out of my life completely. Really, Ger.”

The pilot banked around the thunderhead and when the aircraft flattened out he turned off the seat-belt sign. The flight attendant came by with a last call for alcohol. Gerald ordered two scotches. He poured them both over a couple of factory-formed ice cubes and stirred the drink with his finger. He looked out the window and was surprised to see another aircraft pass at ten o’clock no more than a thousand feet below. He started to fear the FAA had just gone on strike.

“Listen, Wren.” Gerald addressed her as his project, not as his lover. “This guy . . . what did you call him? Sneezy?”

“Sinisa.”

“Whatever. If this guy tries to reinsert himself in your life, you have to inform him that it’s over.”

“I know . . .”

“That it’s over forever, and if he persists he’ll regret it, because I’ll see to it he rues the day he stepped foot back on the island of Manhattan.” Gerald was fairly animated; he ran his hand through his hair, flaring it out so that he looked like a mad scientist. Wren took his hand again, kissed it softly and said, “You’re a brute, but you’re cute. Can I show you something in the bathroom?” Gerald looked around the plane, downed his double-scotch in one gulp and followed Wren into the aft lavatory where she instructed him in a Kama Sutra position called the Medusa. The lavatory smelled of disinfectant and the plane passed through some more unstable air but even under these circumstances Gerald was unfazed. Wren rode his cock for nearly a 150 nautical miles.

ALL ARCHITECTS WANT TO LIVE BEYOND THEIR DEATHS.

Philip Johnson

David Arbogast was one of Pfalzgraf Associates' most important clients. Over many years he commissioned several buildings to be erected on his five hundred acre compound on the Pennsylvania side of the border with Maryland. He had also retained Pfalzgraf Associates to do a restoration on an ill-maintained house designed by Peter Blake, a protégé of Louis Kahn. Now, Arbogast wanted to see some proposals for a museum to house his substantial personal collection of 1980s paintings, photographs and sculptures: works by Basquiat, Keith Haring, Chuck Close, Jeff Koons, and Robert Mapplethorpe among others. He owned eleven copies out of a total of only forty produced of Mapplethorpe's *A Season in Hell*, a portfolio of Rimbaud's poetry accompanied by eight mounted photogravures, each numbered, initialed and signed by Mapplethorpe. Arbogast showed off his Mapplethorpe collection to Gerald who recalled an early exposure to the celebrated photographer's work: the cover of Patti Smith's album *Horses*. At Arbogast's urging Gerald studied Mapplethorpe's oeuvre including his black and white photographs of long Negro penises and shots of the artist himself posing satyr-like with a leather bullwhip dangling like a tail from his anus.

Arbogast was especially proud of his collection of large, stainless steel sculptures of toys created by Koons with whom he was acquainted as a boy when they both lived in Eastern Pennsylvania. Coincidentally, Morcilla was involved in coordinating the permanent installation of Koons' *Puppy* at the Guggenheim Bilbao in the land of her family's ancestors. At the pre-opening party for Koons at the Gug, Gerald made sure to introduce Arbogast to Morcilla and to note her pull in the art world, even though it bothered him tremendously to invoke

her reputation to succeed. He was surprised to learn that the two had known each other as children, although neither had seen the other for many years – or so they said. Gerald detected a hint of chemistry between them – the way he kissed her hand, and how she lit up at the gesture. She exuded some of that Mediterranean charm that had first attracted Gerald to her in college. He couldn't help thinking the two may have been carrying on a little affair of their own, and that perhaps the meeting in Bilbao was no coincidence.

Gerald was excited to work on something as challenging as a museum, even a private one, and saw an opportunity to step up the firm's credentials a notch or two. He took the limo out along Interstate 80 accompanied by Oscar Dupree and Paul Clay, the firm's surveyor, to meet with Arbogast. The meeting was going well until Oscar whispered something to Paul who was sitting next to him at the long mahogany conference table. As Arbogast's Director of Landscaping was speaking, Paul let out a laugh that he quickly stifled, and the whole room stopped to gawk at the display of childish behavior. Gerald didn't know what to do or say, so he sat just there hoping the Director would resume his presentation, which he did after a long, awkward silence. Gerald noticed Arbogast glancing over now and again at Oscar and Paul – his two stooges.

Sitting in the limo after the meeting, heading back to Manhattan, Gerald confronted the two miscreants. "What the fuck was so funny back there? Are you two insane? Jesus Christ, Arbogast is our top client and you two assholes are goofing around like second graders."

Paul, one of the more junior members of the firm feared his job was on the line. "I'm sorry Mr. Pfalzgraf. Oscar made a joke and I couldn't help myself."

Oscar jumped in hoping that he could minimize the damage, or

at least deflect Gerald's anger toward Paul. "I just made an offhand comment about the chocolates, and Paul lost his cool." Gerald recalled that Arbogast's people had set out a pen, a pad of paper, a bottle of water and an expensive piece of wrapped chocolate in front of each seat at the table. Oscar continued, "I just asked 'why does mine have corn in it?'" Paul almost laughed again.

Gerald said, "That's hilarious, Oscar. I know you can tell by the way I'm laughing my fucking ass off." A very unpleasant pause. "If we lose the museum . . ." He didn't need to go beyond the major premise of the syllogism; Oscar and Paul understood completely, Oscar more so because he had witnessed Gerald's wrath a couple of times when a staff member screwed up something substantial. Often a firing was followed up by relentless litigation from Pfalzgraf's lawyers.

Normally Gerald would use the long trip back to Manhattan to discuss the meeting, review proposal options, talk about budgets, but today he was quiet. Scowling quiet. He concluded Oscar had to go but not before performing a service. He worked out some ideas in his head, but nothing worthwhile had gelled. Then, shortly after crossing into New Jersey, Gerald noticed a huge dump truck with the words "TS Erection" stenciled on it. Paul noticed it too, and was about to crack a comment about the ridiculous name but decided to remain silent. Gerald sunk deep into thought. When he got back to the office, he dismissed his two employees with a perfunctory "see you tomorrow" and had Mustapha, his chauffeur, drive up Madison Avenue toward home.

Gerald's cell phone blurted out a *Roxy Music* ringtone: "Do the Strand." The name on the tiny screen: David Arbogast. Gerald answered, fearing something negative from his prized client, and that's what he got.

"Gerald? David Arbogast. Listen, my staff and I really enjoyed

your team's presentation today. I gather they're having fun." *Having fun? Is he being snide?* "The design concepts look to be very integral to the compound." Life an effete, he said "in-TEG-ral." *Sure they look to be "in-TEG-ral" to the compound – Pfalzgraf Associates designed and built all but two of the structures on your goddamned compound.* Gerald's mind augured a hole of negativity whenever he sensed bad news was imminent. Arbogast continued, "I wanted you to know that I've asked Richard Curtain to come by to size up my requirements. I suspect you may have come to believe I would let the contract to Pfalzgraf Associates without competitive bid, but I must say I am a bit concerned with the level of professionalism of your team."

Gerald shuddered at the mention of Richard Curtain, founder and Chairman Emeritus of Curtain, Wall, Buckley and Company – one of Pfalzgraf's major competitors for business in Pennsylvania, and about six times larger in staff, revenue and portfolio.

Richard Curtain, now 92 and still robust, founded Curtain and Wall before Gerald was born. He had once been an intern working for Frank Lloyd Wright and joined his staff shortly after the completion of Taliesin West in 1937. He built Curtain, Wall, Buckley and Company into a formidable entity, and accomplished the goal without ever resorting to ungentlemanly conduct. Curtain's son, Howard, on the other hand was a real son-of-a-bitch, but also more effective than his father in delivering profitable revenue growth and attracting new clients. Exhibiting a keen sense of vision, Howard directed his staff to concentrate on "green" eco-friendly building techniques long before the rest of the industry recognized the imperative. And Howard seemed to his colleagues the kind of person who would stop at nothing to extract an advantage, however slight. Gerald continued to harbor a suspicion that operatives of Curtain, Wall had stolen Pfalzgraf's

confidential design drawings and pricing documents at the behest of Howard.

Until now, Arbogast had chosen not to avail himself of Curtain, Wall's services. Any structure they would erect would likely exhibit Wright's influences. Arbogast's compound was not all that far from Falling Water, and Gerald knew his client did not want to invite unflattering comparisons between his structures and Wright's masterpiece. But anything could happen now.

Gerald responded with his best executive-sounding voice, "David, you have every right to consult whomever you choose. In fact, I think that's being very smart. But I am confident that you will decide on Pfalzgraf after you have evaluated all the factors. David, we've designed virtually all the buildings on your property. We are in the best position to ensure the museum we design will provide the esthetic continuity you must have . . . that your compound must have." Gerald refrained from throwing about the phrase promoted by his marketing director: "Pfalzgraf Associates is uniquely qualified." Sounded like uninspired corporate bullshit.

"Yes, Gerald, you make very good points. I'll let you know how I intend to proceed after I meet with Richard and Howard. Have a good evening, Gerald. Give my regards to Morcilla."

Mustapha struck a huge pothole and Gerald dropped his cell phone on the floor. He was about to scream a monster obscenity, but kept his composure, uncertain whether the connection to Arbogast had been severed. He proceeded glumly up Madison Avenue, feeling extraordinarily tired. He dropped into bed and fell asleep within seconds.

Gerald awoke from a delightful dream to the irritating sound of relentless whirring. In the dream Wren and Martina – his sexy CFO – were naked together kneeling before him, stroking his cock and kissing each other passionately. It was in living color, and unlike most of Gerald's frustrating sexual dreams, in this one he actually has an orgasm. He ejaculates streams of gooey cum all over Wren and Martina who are just about to eat it off each other's breasts when the whirring sound increases in pitch and destroys the moment. Gerald opened his eyes to the light of the rising sun that would soon redouble to unbearable intensity. His cock was heavy like a lead pipe and metallic in color, and he felt as though he hadn't pissed in a week. The insolent clock indicated 6:10. Gerald tried to fall back asleep and press on with his dream to some kind of hopeful conclusion, but it was of no use. The noise of the treadmill overwhelmed his senses. He staggered out of bed into the shower where he availed himself of the recent vivid mental images and masturbated rapidly, the soap on his penis lathering from the vigorous stroking. After blowing a huge load onto the plate glass shower door, Gerald shaved his balls, brushed his teeth and dried his hair. Morcilla was waiting for him when he walked out of his bathroom. His dick was still slightly swollen from all the beating. Morcilla was sweating profusely through a pink unitard that made her look like a five-foot tall bottle of Pepto-Bismol.

"Gerald, what happened at your meeting with David Arbogast?" asked Morcilla with discernible pique in her voice. She stared at his dick a bit too long for his liking.

“What? What do you mean?” Gerald quickly pulled on his underwear, too focused on covering the evidence of masturbation to consider why Morcilla would query him on yesterday’s grim meeting.

“He called me last night to tell me things didn’t go very well in your meeting.”

Gerald straightened up and turned toward Morcilla. “David Arbogast called you? About a meeting with me? What’s going on, Morcilla? Why would he do that?”

“David wants to give you the contract for the museum, but he’s worried about some of your employees, Gerald. He’s concerned your team might not be up to the task. Have you spoken with him?”

“Well, yes, I have. But I asked you – why would he call you?”

Morcilla averted her eyes and turned away slightly from her husband. She responded with uncharacteristic meekness, “I don’t know. I’m just relaying to you that he wants to give you the contract.” Then in a sudden reversal of emotion, Morcilla faced Gerald directly and forcefully exclaimed, “Look, Gerald. If you ever expect to get your architecture firm on solid footing, you have to straighten out your operations. You can’t bring half-wits to meetings with important leaders in the community like David . . . Arbogast.” Morcilla added Arbogast’s last name after it occurred to her that she might have sounded a bit too familiar with the man.

Several thoughts ran through Gerald’s mind at light speed. Was Morcilla trying to invade his business dealings, planning to take over the enterprise? Was she trying to upset his confidence, hoping he might fail and become more dependent upon her than ever? Was Morcilla fucking Arbogast? Gerald looked into his wife’s eyes for a sign, but practiced in the art of manipulation Morcilla revealed nothing. Of all the possibilities Gerald considered, the one he dreaded the most was that Morcilla might be fucking Arbogast. Not that he cared that

much about his wife's carnal exploits, but because he was deeply concerned that Morcilla might toss him overboard so she could unite with Arbogast, an old-moneyed aristocrat who more closely adhered to Morcilla's world view than did Gerald. At that moment, it made perfect sense to Gerald that Morcilla might dump him for Arbogast and leave him to twist in the wind. *Sure, they were childhood chums, and probably harbored long-dormant feelings for each other—then in romantic Basque Country, at the Guggenheim Bilbao, the two meet again and the flame is rekindled.* Suddenly, Gerald felt vulnerable and with it the urgency to eliminate Morcilla intensified.

"You're right, dear. I really should fire Oscar. He's becoming more of a liability as time passes. If Mr. Arbogast calls you again, please remind him we will work two hundred percent to make his museum a masterpiece of design and functionality."

Morcilla shrugged and nodded her head, satisfied apparently with Gerald's acquiescence. "I'm just looking out for your interests, Gerald." She left the bedroom, then doubled back to say, "By the way, Gerald, you should put some cream on yourself. It looks like you might be getting jock itch."

As was often the case when Morcilla upset Gerald, he picked out lots of black to wear to the office. He owned several black suits and one of his favorites was a two-button, single-breasted bespoke worsted spun vicuña number he had tailored in London. He particularly appreciated that the armhole lining was eased and hand felled. Gerald recalled the complaints of so many men who hated suits – too confining, uncomfortable, restrictive – and chose to wear down-scale polo shirts and Dockers instead. If they would simply invest in a decent suit, he thought, these putzes would realize that there is nothing more comfortable than clothing made to measure.

Gerald put on a black tie, black socks, black shoes, and a crisp white shirt. *Can't go totally black or I'll look like a Mafia goon.* He packed up some papers and left the penthouse without saying anything to Morcilla. Mustapha was waiting at the curb with the limo. The New York Times, Wall Street Journal and the Financial Times were waiting for him in a wooden magazine rack installed behind the driver's seat. Gerald scanned the headlines, settling on a story about code violations plaguing a renovation at an early-nineteenth century townhouse in Greenwich Village owned by the photographer Annie Liebowitz. Just as the limo passed by the New York Public Library, Gerald's cell phone rang.

"Hello?" Gerald heard the background noise of what sounded like pots and pans banging, then a sniffle.

"Gerald? Can you hear me?" It was Wren and she seemed to be crying.

"Wren? Where are you? What's wrong?" Gerald pressed a button on the center console, closing the partition between him and Mustapha. "Are you crying?"

"I'm sorry, Ger. I just didn't know what to do."

"What's going on? What's all that noise?"

"I'm in the kitchen of the Vietnamese restaurant down the block. Sinisa came to my apartment this morning. He was drunk and I think he was high on coke. He wanted to sleep it off in my apartment, and when I told him to go away he screamed at me through the door. Called me an ungrateful bitch and a whore."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. He left when the woman down the hall came out to see what was going on. When I was pretty sure he was gone, I ran out and begged the cook to let me in the kitchen. That's where I am now. What should I do?"

For all the months Gerald had been seeing Wren he felt safe in the knowledge that his life with her and his life with Morcilla had been properly partitioned off from each other. So far, nothing had occurred that might compromise the secrecy of his affair, but now he could see the return of Sinisa becoming the source for a lot of drama that could easily betray him. His first instinct was to stay out of it – let Wren figure a way to disengage from her ex-boyfriend. But when she sniffled like a child and asked him – her mentor – for help deciding what to do, Gerald concluded there was no alternative but to get involved and take whatever risks such action imposed upon him.

“What’s the address of the restaurant, Wren? I’ll come get you.”

Gerald instructed Mustapha to divert to the Vietnamese restaurant on 45th Street – to pick up a “student” who is interested in interning at Pfalzgraf Associates. Mustapha pulled the limo to the entrance, and opened the door for Wren. She was dressed in sloppy clothing, having worked a late shift at Public Hair the previous evening. Gerald hoped her appearance wouldn’t reduce the veracity of his story to Mustapha that this girl was a candidate for employment.

Once inside the spacious vehicle, Wren wrapped her arms around Gerald and kissed him. “Not here, doll. We’ll go to the park to talk.”

Sitting in a quiet spot in Madison Square Park, Wren nervously retold the entire story. Gerald took the approach of trying to minimize the episode, although he assessed the situation to be potentially grave. “Listen, Wren. This guy is probably just a basic asshole. Sometimes when men get drunk they’ll dredge up recollections of past romances and delude themselves into thinking that if they show up at the doorstep of an old flame, that she’ll instantly have sex with him. When this asshole Sinisa sobers up, he’ll probably regret making a fool of himself in your hallway and either apologize or just disappear.”

Wren responded skeptically, “I don’t know, Ger. Maybe you’re right. But I’ll tell you – he frightens me.”

“Don’t worry, baby, I’ll protect you. I told you if he persists he’ll regret it. In the meantime, I’ll send a company we work with over to your apartment today to beef up your locks and put in a security system. OK? Now, let me take you home to get some rest.”

Rather than call Mustapha, Gerald hailed a cab and accompanied Wren to her apartment. While she waited in the cab outside her building, he went inside to check whether anyone weird was lurking around, and when he concluded the coast was clear he escorted Wren to her door. He couldn’t help remembering the first time he made love to her that night in the same dumpy place, and he struggled mightily to resist seducing her back into the bed right then.

“I have to go now, Wren. Get some sleep and I’ll talk to you later. Love ya.”

“Me too, Ger. Thank you so much. Bye.”

Gerald spent much of the day in his eighteenth floor office staring out the window and thinking about Wren’s ex-boyfriend. He had to learn more. And he had to size up how Sinisa’s rude intrusion into his happiness might somehow be exploited.

Gerald was not a native New Yorker but since moving to Manhattan after graduating from CMU he quickly behaved as though he had lived his entire life on the insular island, perceiving it in much the same way Saul Steinberg portrayed it in his satirical 1976 New Yorker cover, "View of the World from 9th Avenue." And like so many native New Yorkers Gerald had never been to the popular sites frequented by tourists, had never done the things tourists do right after dumping off their luggage at the Days Inn: visit the Statue of Liberty, step aboard the Intrepid, ride the Circle Line, eat at an absurdly over-priced, culinary-challenged theme restaurant. Today, however, Gerald found himself high above the East River in a red tram that makes round trips along a woven steel cable connecting 59th Street to Roosevelt Island. He nervously held Wren's hand, and when the car began to rock after it crossed the first stanchion following a steep climb from the terminal on Second Avenue, he reflexively squeezed it tightly. For the few minutes it took the couple to reach Roosevelt Island, Wren felt protective of Gerald – a feeling that had never really revealed itself in their relationship to this point. When the door of the tram car opened, Gerald rushed ahead to be the first to step off, leaving Wren behind a group of students in parochial school uniforms.

Gerald had invited Wren to the island in the middle of the East River to conduct a serious conversation, away from distraction, about her relationship with Sinisa and how she would like to untangle from it – although she didn't know it yet. He had told her he needed to scope out some of the nineteenth century architecture for a client proposal

– a true story; Gerald always covered his ulterior motives with the veneer of truth – and asked her to accompany him. Up to now Gerald had made no overt attempts to pry deeply into that part of Wren’s life that had once included past boyfriends, just as he would not have welcomed serious inquiry from Wren about his life with Morcilla, but Gerald felt it necessary to assess the degree to which Sinisa had dug his claws into Wren and from there determine the best way to help his young lover extricate herself from his grip.

“I never knew you were afraid of heights, Ger,” commented Wren with a slight tease in her voice that Gerald took to imply, “Well, well, Mr. In-Charge has a weak spot.”

“I’m not,” Gerald replied unconvincingly, “I just don’t trust ancient, rusty cables. Especially when I’m hanging from them a hundred fifty feet above the river. I bet that goddamned tram hasn’t been thoroughly inspected in the past ten years.” Gerald was reminded of the time for the same reason – supposed fear of cables – that he weaseled out of riding “The Comet,” a pre-war amusement park attraction that should have been condemned, dismantled and moved to The Museum of Evil Carnival Rides. Gerald was visiting the amusement park while on an eighth-grade class trip, and even before setting eye upon the decrepit ride – three dented rocket ships inspired by 1930s space vehicles like those in the movie *Flash Gordon’s Trip to Mars*, each hanging by cables from a large, rotating steel wheel perched high upon a fifty foot pole – he knew he couldn’t get on it, for it had achieved notoriety among children and adults alike as “The Vomit Comet.” He knew his fellow classmates would heap ridicule upon him if he told the truth and revealed his dread of puking all over the unfortunate people in line waiting below him for the next ride. So he fabricated an elaborate tale about the tensile strength of steel cable that had been stressed over several decades, and how the ride really should be shut down

as a safety hazard. He even got the words “metal fatigue” and “cross-sectional torque” into the argument. The school’s principal standing in line behind Gerald replied, “Are you planning to be an architect when you grow up, Mr. Pfalzgraf?” and at that moment it suddenly occurred to him that he just might be well-suited to such a profession. As he turned to face the principal and acknowledge the woman’s incisive observation, another student passing overhead in the dented rocket ship sprayed a load of vomit – a nasty brew of cotton candy, root beer, strawberry milk-shake, corn-dog, and funnel cake – all over the line of people, most of whom had been looking up in palpable anticipation of being the next to board the onerous ride.

“You really think those cables are unsafe?” Wren asked, now not completely certain whether Gerald was bullshitting.

“I’m an architect Wren – trust me. We’re taking the F train back to Manhattan.”

Gerald was surprised to learn that the only form of transportation on Roosevelt Island was the locally-operated Red Bus. “What the hell! No taxis? Isn’t this part of New York?” He hadn’t ridden a bus since his days in elementary school, and he certainly had no intention to break that streak now. In addition to devilishly whirling amusement park rides, Gerald also suffered from nausea aboard lurching buses – and he had no desire to arm Wren with the knowledge of another one of his frailties. Instead, the two strolled a couple dozen blocks along Main Street to the grounds of the old New York Insane Asylum that once occupied a large parcel on the northern end of the island – known at that time as Blackwell’s Island. The centerpiece of the asylum, designed by Alexander Jackson Davis, a premier architect of the time and a founder of the American Institute of Architects, was a beautiful, five-story octagonal tower constructed of blue-stone quarried right on the island, and

featured a magnificent flying staircase spiraling up from a glass-brick floor illuminated from below. Reaching out from the octagon had been two wings of the asylum that fell into disrepair over the decades and were eventually demolished; today, the old asylum was an upscale residence into which the original restored octagon had been integrated.

David Arbogast suggested an octagonally shaped building for his museum – an idea Gerald found trite, but one he could not dismiss out of hand lest he risk insulting his multi-millionaire client. Gerald examined the old asylum tower at Arbogast’s request. He was a bit embarrassed when he had to admit to Arbogast that he had never visited the building, a masterpiece situated in his own home town. Gerald shot six rolls of film, paced the interior of the rotunda and wandered the grounds. He went through the motions all in an attempt to prove he had done due diligence. In the end, Pfalzgraf Associates would proceed on a design for the museum in the International Style, as always.

“This was really an insane asylum once, Ger? It’s hard to imagine. It’s so beautiful and inviting now. The octagon is such an elegant shape – I can see why your client prefers it.” Wren bent down to smell a rose in the expansive flower garden, and Gerald noted the fine definition in her thighs – visible because she was wearing that same short pleated skirt she had on the day they made love in the art gallery in SoHo. Gerald instinctively licked his lips and rubbed off the moisture with the back of his hand, looking a bit like the desperately horny man pictured in the opening sequence of *Faster, Pussycat. Kill! Kill!*

Making love in public places, like breaking into abandoned buildings, was another of Wren’s secret thrills. In addition to the art gallery encounter Wren and Gerald had made love in an elevator, in the public library, on a plane, and while driving at night at break-neck speeds in Morcilla’s Bentley with the top down on the Palisades Parkway – all fantasies that Wren checked off a list she had made as a teenager. And

still, her list contained more scenarios unfulfilled than accomplished. She kept the list's contents secret from Gerald; he never knew if an innocuous trip to the grocery store or the Museum of Natural History might turn into a sexual episode of priapic proportions.

"I wouldn't say he prefers it; he just wants me to consider it. But yes, this place was once overrun by moping idiots, gibbering maniacs, and hideous people picking their lips and munching on their fingernails." Wren cast a disapproving face at Gerald for his insensitive remarks, and in response he shrugged as if he had merely reported fact. "Would you believe that the administrators of the asylum back in the 1800s actually employed criminals from local prisons to guard the inmates?"

"Sounds like the stuff of Charles Dickens," replied Wren.

Gerald aimed his camera with its 24mm tilt-shift lens designed for photographing buildings, and took several shots of the northeast façade. He said as he mentally estimated the height and distance of the building, "I wonder – if Sinisa had been around then, would he have been an inmate or a guard? Seems like he could qualify for either role – what do you think?" Wren looked away, toward Queens, contemplating where Gerald was planning to go with the conversation. It had been a few weeks since Charleston where Gerald, fairly drunk, brought up the notion of divorcing his wife – or was it ridding himself of her? And he had offered at least twice to protect Wren from her former boyfriend. Wren had been careful not to get overly optimistic that Gerald would actually divorce his wife – lots of men in his position talk about it, but when the promise of pain and diminished life-style ceases to be an abstraction, they uniformly balk – but she had become optimistic that he might at least do something about her Sinisa problem. She had hoped Gerald might transfer a small fortune to her so she could disappear from Sinisa, but upon further reflection she understood Gerald

would want to execute a more thorough, complete plan. Surely Gerald would not be satisfied with any plan that left Sinisa fit and able to seek and retake his lost possession. During their relationship, Gerald had told Wren a number of stories from his youth from which a common theme emerged: after his father died, Gerald Pfalzgraf didn't paper over problems, but confronted them relentlessly, head-on. Wren assumed correctly that in the anonymity of Roosevelt Island Gerald would segue into a comprehensive interrogation of her past life with Sinisa.

Gerald wrapped up his documentation of the octagon and packed away his camera, a high-end Leica he bought after getting his architect degree, replacing the basic screw-mount Pentax he used throughout his adolescence. He stood up, looked into Wren's eyes, drew her close and gave her a deep, passionate kiss. He held her for a long time then ran his fingers through her blonde hair. Without saying a word, the couple walked hand-in-hand along West Road to a romantic spot where they sat together on a bench overlooking the East River toward John Jay Park in Manhattan.

"Tell me all about Sinisa, Wren. How did you come to be with such a loser? I have to know."

Wren knew the day would come, should she stay with Gerald long enough, when she would have to undergo an interrogation about the circumstances surrounding Sinisa, and she was prepared for it.

"You already know I came to New York from Vermont when I was nineteen, but things didn't go as smoothly as I might have portrayed it to you, Ger. My family didn't approve of me leaving and to try to stop me they cut off my funds. They thought if I didn't have access to money I would change my mind and stay home, but it only made me more committed to get away. I hitchhiked to Manhattan, found a place to stay with six other poor kids, and started working, believe it or not, at a Chinese restaurant. I was the only Caucasian there. I think

the owner had a crush on me – someone told me I looked like a white version of the Chinese pinup girl he had hanging on his office wall.”

Gerald continued to look across the river in an effort not to display any particular reaction – he was familiar with the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, and he wished not to let his own observations interfere with her telling of the story.

At this point Wren’s voice became subdued and less audible. She spoke toward the ground. Gerald moved in closer to her. “One day, I went into the back of the restaurant to pick up an order – I think it was for Kung-Bo chicken – and the owner pinned me against the wall. For months he had been leering at me, and leaving me illiterate messages with my paycheck, asking me if I like fucky-fucky. I blew it off – a couple other waitresses told me he was harmless. He pinned me against the wall and pushed his hand under my uniform. I looked down and saw his penis sticking out of his pants – he had a hard-on, and it looked like a disgusting reptile, uncircumcised and pointy like the head of a reptile.” Now, Gerald couldn’t help but look toward his young lover, studying her face and beginning to regret initiating the whole conversation. Wren started to cry.

“Hey, baby . . .” Gerald softly interrupted, but Wren continued, “The bastard almost got his pathetic yellow thing under my panties when this stocky guy came into the back room. I think he was just going to the bathroom, but when he spotted me pressed against the wall he grabbed the owner by the hair and pulled him off me. Ger, you wouldn’t have believed it. The stocky guy – Sinisa – threw the owner to the floor, and when the bastard lunged at Sinisa with a huge butcher knife, Sinisa grabbed his wrist, just like in the movies. The two struggled. I was so scared, I actually peed myself. I couldn’t look away even though I wanted to. They were face to face, struggling with the knife when Sinisa bit into the man’s nose. I mean he really bit into it.

Seriously. The owner dropped the knife, screamed in pain, and covered his face with both hands – blood was pouring from his face. Sinisa looked at me with sort of a grin and spit out a big chunk of bloody flesh – most of the man’s nose. I gagged and threw up. I was a mess. Three cooks ran in from the kitchen, but when they saw the blood all over Sinisa’s mouth, they backed away like he was the Devil. Sinisa helped me to my feet, wiped himself off with an apron, and we walked out together.”

“Good God! Don’t tell me you were impressed with this exhibition of barbarism?”

“Barbarism? Gerald, the owner was trying to rape me, and Sinisa rescued me. He fought the bastard even though the owner came at him with a ten inch knife.”

“And Sinisa smiled when he bit the man’s nose off?” As soon as he said it, Gerald slouched a bit into the bench, sounding to himself a bit too much like a week-kneed liberal.

“I didn’t say he smiled, I said he grinned. OK – maybe he didn’t grin, I don’t remember every detail. I was scared. Jesus, Gerald.” Wren wiped a tear from her cheek.

“I’m sorry, Wren. I understand – then what?”

“Well, you can probably guess that we started going out together. He was very nice to me at first, and spent a lot of money on me. Sinisa’s aunt had recently won the New York lottery and gave him a big cut. He was able to buy the place in Chelsea and asked me to move in with him. Nothing bad happened until he took me to Mardi Gras. We drove all the way to New Orleans in a convertible BMW that he also bought with his share of his aunt’s lottery winnings. Once there, we got into a minor disagreement over who was the last person to use up all the toilet paper. At first we were just joking with each other, blaming the other for being wasteful or thoughtless or incontinent. Out of the

blue he screamed at me like I was a stupid animal. He called me a retard, one of his favorite put-downs. He even started calling me that when we went to restaurants and bars. If I took more than two seconds to decide what I wanted, he'd say something like, 'I'll have a Grey Goose and retard here will have a – what is it that retards have again?' The bartender would always look upon me with pity, which almost hurt as much as Sinisa's insults. Later I realized that I had become one of Sinisa's prized possessions, even though he treated me like shit. I think in some ways if the equivalent of a piece of shit showed the audacity to challenge Sinisa it would have been more of an intolerable indignity than if someone important challenged him. I guess it sounds weak or stupid, but the more he berated me and threatened me and insulted me, the more I acted like his prisoner. Even though he has never actually hurt me physically, it never seemed to be an option to leave because he seemed capable of doing violence. If I tried to leave, I know he would find me somehow and exact a sadistic form of punishment. It was scary, Gerald."

"Listen, Wren, if you don't want to talk about it anymore, that's OK. I only . . ."

"You asked, Gerald, so I'm telling you."

"I only . . ."

"There are no rusty cables in my story, Gerald. No reason for you to fear anything."

That hurt, but Gerald recognized he had initiated the whole catharsis, and in any event, he did need to know the particulars so he could decide a course of action – or choose to do nothing.

"Around the same time I had become a piece of Sinisa's property," Wren continued, "I learned he had started doing free-lance work for the Serbian mob here in America. I guess he met some thugs at a bar

where Serbs hang out – some joint near the St. Sava Cathedral – and got hooked up into some drug deals and other kinds of criminal enterprise.”

Gerald was familiar with the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral of St. Sava – a Gothic Revival church designed by Richard Upjohn situated only a few blocks from the offices of Pfalzgraf Associates. Upjohn was the first president of the American Institute of Architects and a founder along with Alexander Jackson Davis, the architect of the Octagon.

Wren pressed on with a pained expression on her face. “Sinisa called the mob Naša Stvar – presumably a cheap Eastern European knock-off of the Cosa Nostra. That’s when I really got scared. Huge brutes with cauliflower ears wearing black leather jackets started to come by the flat at all hours, and Sinisa would leave with them, returning days later, sometimes with blood on his clothes, or with a poorly-sewn suture in his forehead. Clearly he was involved in beatings and violence, and sometimes, I guess, he was on the receiving end of it too. Anyway, one of his jobs took him to Florida and it became so involved – I think he was ordered to run a fence out of a bar in Miami – that he moved from New York. He demanded I come with him, but I refused. He was too busy to chase me down, and besides, he hooked up with some tart at the bar and seemed to have forgotten all about me. I thought I was free.”

When Wren smiled at the quaint notion of freedom, Gerald smiled too. But she immediately reverted to her pained expression. “Now he’s back and I fear it’s only a matter of time before Sinisa transcends his petty insults and tries to hurt me. I feel powerless to do anything about it. When I’m with you, Ger, I feel alive. I love you so much and I think you love me too. I . . . uh . . . what can I . . .”

Gerald stared down at the rock garden around the seating area and shook his head. Wren continued, “Would you believe he once held a gun to my head and pulled the trigger.” Gerald looked up in

astonishment. Several seconds elapsed before he responded rather lamely, for he could not yet grasp the full extent of Sinisa's sociopathology, "Wren, this is serious."

"Yes, it's serious, Gerald." She spoke it like a Mommy to her toddler: *You're right, dear, your diaper does smell poopy.*

"He left me and he left town, but he never really did either. He held onto his Chelsea apartment; never sold it, I suppose, so he could keep it as an lifeline back to the City. I guess I'm like that apartment to him – something he could put off to the side for awhile, something that would be waiting for him when he returned." Wren sounded resigned to a grim fate. "After all this time, he comes back and thinks he can reclaim me, just like that." She snapped her fingers.

A large barge heading north on the East River passed before Wren and Gerald, pushed by a tugboat belching black smoke. A deck-hand whistled at Wren, grabbed his crotch and made an obscene gesture with his the index finger of his right hand and a circle formed by the index finger and thumb of his left hand. Gerald bolted upright and screamed a string of curses at the man. He picked up a rock the size of a baseball from the garden and hurled it toward the tugboat – it fell into the water a good hundred yards short of the ship. Gerald rubbed his shoulder, now suffering a stabbing pain from throwing the rock with all his might. On another day, Gerald would have shrugged off such an insult – after all, the ignorant asshole posed no threat to Wren from his distant location in the middle of the river – but today, listening to Wren's sad, desperate story, Gerald's anger toward the deck-hand was momentarily boundless.

"Are you OK, Ger?" asked Wren, noticing him rubbing his shoulder and wincing as he walked back to the bench. She caressed his arm, then rested her head on his shoulder, kissing it softly. "Oh, I don't know what to do any longer. You'll have to think for both of us."

At that moment Gerald's love for Wren reached an all-time high. He stated without pretense or hyperbole, "Wren, I love you – more than anything. Even more than I loved you an hour ago. I made a promise to you and I am committed to keeping it. We both know Sinisa has to go, and I don't mean back to Belgrade, or from wherever the fuck he hatched." Wren nodded, and in response to Gerald's forceful declaration cracked a bright smile that lifted Gerald's spirits. He had just said that he loved Wren more than anything else, and after the dust settled, he found the statement to be genuine.

Gerald embraced Wren as the sun set behind the United Nations building to the south. The cereal-box profile of the UN reminded Gerald of *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock's classic film starring Cary Grant, Eva Marie Saint, James Mason and Martin Landau. Gerald made no secret that his inspiration for drinking Gibson cocktails came directly from an early part of the movie in which Grant's character, Roger Thornhill enjoys the urbane drink in the company of Eve Kendall on the Lake Shore Limited.

With time and daylight running out, the couple boarded the Red Bus much to Gerald's chagrin, although the ride was much smoother than those of the stiff school buses he rode as a boy. He didn't throw up or even complain. Then Gerald and Wren took the F train back to Manhattan, forgoing the tram and its rusty cables. Alone together in the last car as the train passed beneath the East River Wren stood up and took hold of a stainless steel bar above her head. She hiked up her short skirt, pulled her panties down to her knees, bent slightly at the waist, and looked teasingly over her shoulder, inviting Gerald to participate in quick, vertical copulation. By the time the train pulled into the Lexington Avenue station Gerald was soaked in perspiration and Wren was ready to check off another item on her long list of "Must-do Fucks."

Gerald never went to Public Hair on weekends, but today Wren was working a rare Saturday lunch shift, filling in for a colleague who was to be a bridesmaid that afternoon. Gerald told Morcilla he had to pick up some papers at the office, which was true because he purposely left them there on Friday. Gerald was looking forward to talking to Wren whom he had not seen since the Roosevelt Island excursion, and to some 12 o'clocktails to help him forget about David Arbogast, Howard Curtain, and the inquisition from Morcilla. The moment he set eyes on Wren he knew something was wrong. Her jawline was not perfect today. She had tried to mask the swelling with too much makeup which just made the discontinuity more obvious.

"Jesus, Wren. What happened? Are you OK?" Gerald surprised himself at how concerned he was for another person's well being, something that had been mostly foreign to him since his father died. Wren sensed the purity of his concern, and started to cry. Some tables were occupied, but no one was sitting at the bar.

"Sinisa . . ." – sob – "hit me."

Instantly upon hearing the word "hit" Gerald reflexively clenched his jaw and balled his right fist.

"That cocksucker, that fucking cocksucker." Gerald's rage interfered with his ability to say anything more coherent.

Wren blotted her eyes with some cocktail napkins. "What do you want to drink, Ger?"

"Forget drinks. What happened?"

Wren walked to the far end of the bar; Gerald followed.

“When I got back from Roosevelt Island, Sinisa was waiting for me in my apartment. I guess he broke in, or maybe he convinced the super to let him in. I could tell he was coked-up and drunk. He was sitting in the dark, smoking. There were butts all over the carpet by the chair. I’m surprised he didn’t set the apartment on fire. Right away he accused me of fucking someone else, and called me a pig and a whore – “bludnicka!” he yells at me – and all sorts of other foreign insults I don’t understand. Of course, I didn’t have a chance to shower after our little escapade in the subway – who knows, maybe I looked J.F.’ed.”

“Huh?”

“J.F.’ed – just fucked.”

Gerald furrowed his brow upon hearing this abbreviation for the first time, and then he blurted, “I knew the fucking bastard would get violent.”

“He *is* a bastard, Gerald. He used to treat me like a slave, and he constantly berated me. If he didn’t leave for days on end to Atlantic City or wherever, I’d never get a break. If I didn’t have his dinner ready for him when he came home, God help me. I remember the time he busted my balls because his Salisbury steak wasn’t done to perfection. I thought I’d never hear the end of it. Ranting and raving like a lunatic over a cheap, shitty frozen dinner.”

Just then Gerald was vividly reminded of the one and only time he tried Salisbury steak, a mealy glob of meat product covered with diarrhea-gravy, accompanied by a rubbery muffin and shrapnel-like corn, each segmented off into its own compartment on a tin tray upon which the whole ugly mess sat. Gerald’s father had once traded a case of cough medicine for a couple dozen frozen TV dinners. When Gerald spit out the steak after a single bite, his father balled him out for wasting food and ordered him to sit at the table until he finished all the vile contents. Gerald missed a crucial episode of *Batman* rather

than take another bite. He certainly could not polish off the entire tray, so he sat there until 2 a.m. until his father stumbled out of bed and asked, "Are you still here? Go to bed for Christ sake. But remember, young man, one day you'll understand the value of a dollar, and you won't be so flippant about wasting food."

Whatever Gerald knew about Sinisa came from Wren. He had never met Sinisa. In fact the two men had never laid eyes on each other, not even by accident in Public Hair, for Sinisa had been banished months earlier by the bar's management.

Shortly after Wren made the jump from Jamba Juice to Public Hair, Sinisa made an appearance at the bar during a period of peak of activity on a typically busy Friday evening. Every table was occupied and additional patrons waited on the sidewalk outside consuming cigarettes and cell phone minutes. The bar was packed. Sinisa was visibly stoned to anyone who might look closely at his dilated pupils, but he did nothing at first to call attention to his impaired condition. He moved quietly toward the bar and didn't say a word as he took a barstool temporarily vacated by a woman who left to go pee. Sinisa simply sat down next to her date and leered at the side of the man's head. After several uncomfortable seconds that seemed much longer, he confronted the man. "You're not trying to hit on that blondie bartender are you, svežanj? That's my wife. You want her to suck your cock you have to ask permission from me." The man turned briefly toward Sinisa and realizing the foolishness of engaging him quickly returned his head to its original position, staring straight ahead at nothing. Wren glanced over at the two men and knew instantly that Sinisa was tormenting the poor son-of-a-bitch. At that moment, she expected this Friday to be her last day employed at Public Hair – summarily fired for giving a menace like Sinisa a reason to come into the bar.

The man's date returned from the bathroom, looked at the insolent Sinisa then stared some daggers at her boyfriend. The man feared the options before him: the swift fists of Sinisa, or the long-term emasculation by his girlfriend. The man chose to inform Sinisa kindly that the stool upon which he had made himself comfortable had in fact been recently occupied by his girlfriend. He made the declaration as though he were talking to an old chum about female trouble – you know these women, wink-wink, they've got to get their way, or else.

Expecting outrage from Sinisa, instead the man received a slurred apology. Sinisa extended his hand in an apparent gesture of reconciliation, knocking the man's topped-off Manhattan onto his lap in a move that looked suspiciously contrived. Sinisa then left for the bathroom and threw up several times into the black urinal, completely submerging the scented disk with vomit. He splashed cold water on his face and after regaining his composure produced a vial of cocaine from his sock, the entire contents of which he intended to draw into his nose to mix with mucus and drip down the back of his throat. Just as Sinisa lifted a tiny spoon to his nostril a large muscular man dressed in a tight black Armani tee shirt and ass-squeezing black slacks came into the men's room, followed closely by another man half his size dressed in a nicely tailored dark suit and festive-colored Hermes tie.

The big guy, Horst, announced, "Sir, you'll have to leave the restaurant. Now. We don't permit drug use on the premises, and we don't tolerate harassment of our patrons."

Sinisa wanted nothing more than to bite off the nose of the tattle-telling rat back at the bar he had moments ago drenched in bourbon, vermouth and Angostura bitters. Nonetheless, he walked out of the bathroom civilly, escorted by the bouncer walking a step behind him. On the way to the exit, as Sinisa ambled past a table at which a snappy-looking young couple was about to begin the primi

course, he lost his balance and plowed into the two-top. The woman at the table, in addition to getting a plate load of orecchiette with lamb neck sausage, morels and spring onion dumped on her light-colored outfit, suffered a laceration on her forearm from a broken wine glass. The injured woman sued the owners of Public Hair and accepted a respectable out-of-court settlement. The owners pressed and later dropped charges against Sinisa, settling for a judge's restraining order forbidding him to come within five hundred feet of Public Hair and its management.

Stroking her jaw ever so lightly, Wren continued. "This is the first time he actually hit me – before, he was satisfied with just humiliating me and insulting me. But he's basically a violent person and I guess it's in his DNA to hurt people."

Gerald was even more motivated now to help Wren get rid of Sinisa. Not only was she suffering this bastard's wrath, but Gerald also concluded that he himself was in grave danger of Sinisa's penchant for violence. Gerald let his mind wander a bit over the scope of potential danger: his head bashed in by a jealous Sinisa lurking outside a restaurant where Wren and he had just eaten; his company's offices ransacked, or one of his employees injured; an unfortunate encounter with Morcilla in which Sinisa the cuckold reveals the sordid details of Mr. Pfalzgraf's affair with a very young and pretty woman.

With more composure now, Wren said, "The thing that really disgusts me is that when he pinned me against the wall and screamed in my face, I could smell pussy on his breath. The bastard was attacking me for something he just got done doing himself." She shook her head and looked at her shoes. Gerald reached up and gently cupped her jaw in his hand.

"Remember what I talked about on Roosevelt Island and in that

piano bar in Charleston, after the opera. You know – when I was 33 and a third percent drunk?”

“Half-drunk,” she retorted quickly, smiling briefly through a wince.

“OK, half. Still, I meant it all. I *will* help you with this Sinisa problem. And I’ll work on my Morcilla problem, too. By this time next year, we’ll be together forever. What do you think?”

This time Wren didn’t hesitate. “Yes. Please help me Ger. I love you.”

“I love you too, Wren.”

TO CREATE ARCHITECTURE IS TO PUT IN ORDER. PUT WHAT IN ORDER? FUNCTION AND OBJECTS.

Le Corbusier

Gerald paid a surprise visit to Signore Enzo – “that Ferrari asshole” – in his private office at the posh dealership on Park Avenue and expressed his extreme displeasure at the runaround his sales manager was giving Mrs. Pfalzgraf on the red 360 Modena. Gerald asked a number of insulting, patronizing questions intended to cause the man discomfort. Didn’t Signore Enzo value Mrs. Pfalzgraf’s business, and her past automobile purchases? Why would a dealership selling world-class, celebrated brands like Ferrari and Maserati renege on a price quote? Wasn’t it foolish to jeopardize a solid customer relationship over something as petty as the price of luggage, even if the luxury pieces were each hand-crafted and custom-shaped to fit in the irregular spaces behind the driver’s seat and around the automobile’s spare tire? Gerald spoke briskly and with evident pique in his voice, allowing the man to interject nothing more than an occasional, “Yes, but . . .”

When Gerald felt he made his point, he let Signore Enzo blather on about excise taxes, gas guzzler taxes, luxury taxes and all sorts of other fees that affected the final price. He even suggested that Morcilla had already beaten him down to where his profit was barely more than the value of the disputed luggage. Gerald believed that for sure, but paid no attention, even turning away impolitely to check email on his Blackberry while the general manager spoke a combination of English and, when flustered, rapid-fire Italian.

A sweet boy insulated by his parents from the risks and dangers of the world outside Aliquippa, Gerald learned how to be a bastard after his father abruptly died of a heart attack at age forty-nine in a

nondescript motel in Jollytown, Pennsylvania at the end of a mostly unproductive day pushing pharmaceuticals and free sandwiches on disinterested doctors. Within days of the tragedy, Gerald met reality and he was disturbed to learn he was woefully unprepared for it. Along with his mother he was informed by a sweaty, balding agent that the deceased had recently cancelled his life insurance policy, presumably to save money. Perhaps he thought he would live forever. The Pfalzgraf family, never affluent yet comfortable, but now reduced to two unemployed members, would in the coming weeks struggle to pay for the most meager and basic of life's necessities. Gerald wore the same underwear and socks for a full week in the misguided belief that by doing so he would help his mother save on detergent and hot water. Witnessing his mother scramble to make ends meet, her vibrant personality reduced to a mass of worry and fret, and observing with disgust as his parents' friends retreated from view mere days after the funeral where each and every one had vowed sincerely to help Gerald and his mother in any way possible, Gerald became hostile toward the world. He resolved to transcend his passivity, take ownership of his fate and dictate terms. In making his first, limited steps to assert himself with fellow students, retail clerks and public servants, Gerald was astonished to learn that ninety-five percent of the American population is stupid and ovine. All his life Gerald had been instructed to respect elders, play nice, and defer to his betters; with the death of his father, it became crystal clear that all of that was bullshit. Not that Gerald felt deceived – he simply concluded that children who grew up in the Depression inevitably became parents who maniacally avoided risk and confrontation. Deeper analysis of society led inexorably to Gerald's amorality. He read and re-read *The Prince* by Machiavelli, and committed all the significant portions to memory; he became convinced that coercion creates legality. Unfocused on the

future as a young teenager, Gerald applied himself more acutely after the death of his father. He envisioned himself an influential executive awash in wealth. He willed himself into Carnegie-Mellon University, convincing the Dean of Admissions that he deserved a full scholarship. He chose architecture as a career for its combination of artistry and practical business value.

Gerald met Morcilla Calatrava briefly in their freshman year at a very lame fraternity party and he concluded the rich bitch was an intolerable effete, but a year later he found himself curiously drawn to her, and her money. At a small, gritty rock venue outside Pittsburgh in one of the many downtrodden steel mill towns along the Monongahela River, where an untalented yet spirited punk band called *The Cunning Runts* tried to emulate *The Damned*, and where CMU students in the audience celebrated the Sunday evening before the Columbus Day holiday, a semi-drunken Gerald, dressed in a black velvet jacket and skin-tight black jeans approached Morcilla and her table of snobby friends, and asked her to dance. Morcilla laughed at Gerald as though he were a lowly member of her family's lawn crew who had just dropped a load of manure on himself, but when he turned up his rebellious charm and started to lavish attention on another, much lovelier girl at the table, Morcilla quickly changed her mind. As Gerald and Morcilla jumped around to the band's rendition of "Neat, Neat, Neat" Gerald could not avert his eyes from Morcilla's bouncing, bountiful tits. From the time he was a young cub scout Gerald pegged himself a tit man.

After dancing to several more poorly-performed punk songs, Gerald and Morcilla sat alone together and started to talk about the ethos of the punk movement. Gerald didn't really believe there was such a thing as the punk ethos, but he used the fictional concept to segue into a discussion of Machiavelli. Morcilla sat on the edge of her chair and thrust her beautiful chest toward Gerald for she desired

the lanky young man who seemed a wild, dangerous alternative to the androgynous, translucent sons of wealth and privilege her parents routinely introduced her to. She listened to him talk about the rule of law and of force, of loyalty and cruelty, of truth and dissembling, whether it's better to be loved than feared. Finally he shut up and gulped a double shot glass of Wild Turkey; and just when he figured he'd lost Morcilla's attention, she whispered in a sultry voice, "Nulla si fa senza volontà," then startled him with a hard kiss on the mouth. Two hours later Gerald was happily subjugated in Morcilla's bed as she smothered him with her breasts and rode his cock like the champion horse jumper she had once trained to be.

When it seemed Signore Enzo had completed his plea for understanding, Gerald said flatly, "Let me make a proposition. What is the difference in price between the Modena and the yellow convertible Spider in the window?"

Signore Enzo, unprepared for the question excused himself for a moment to get the figures and left the office. Gerald sat down in one of the voluptuous Marc Newson Felt Chairs positioned in front of the desk. Over the speakers set into the ceiling, he listened to a tenor he believed to be Placido Domingo singing "La Donna e Mobile." The Felt Chair covered in rich, red Hallingdal fabric struck Gerald as a consummate example of contemporary Northern Italian design, although Newson was in fact an industrial designer who hailed from Australia. Gerald contrasted the comfort of the Felt Chair to what he believed to be the agony of sitting in the bird-like Ravello chair he had seen Tom Stull suffering in at the bank, and again he recalled that fine day with Wren in the art gallery in SoHo. Within seconds, he had an erection and was forced by discomfort to shift the position of his legs.

He closed his eyes and savored his memories of making love to Wren behind the elevator shaft.

Signore Enzo returned to his office and opened the door quickly, startling Gerald out of his daydream. The general manager cited a price difference of \$25,000 between the two Ferrari models, and started to say something else, but Gerald cut him off. "OK. Here's what I want you to do. Offer Mrs. Pfalzgraf the Spider for the same price as the Modena. I will cover the 25K difference, but you must never tell her I did so. I want her to think she squeezed you for a better deal all by herself. That would make her happy, that would make me very happy, and you should be grateful for retaining our business." Gerald stood up and faced Signore Enzo – shorter than Gerald by ten inches – and in a semi-threatening tone, warned, "If you don't accept my proposal . . ." – Gerald hesitated to heighten the dramatic effect, and drew uncomfortably close to Enzo – ". . . my wife and I, and all our friends and business associates will make our future automobile purchases in Greenwich." Threatening to cut off business was more intimidating to a man like Signore Enzo than a hostile gesture with a crowbar. Signore Enzo prepared to say something in mild protest, but stopped himself. "Yes Mr. Pfalzgraf. That would be fine. How would you like to complete the transaction?"

"I'll come back tomorrow." The general manager cordially agreed and thanked Gerald for his patience and understanding, practically apologizing even though he believed he was the aggrieved party. Signore Enzo extended his hand, but Gerald had already turned away and began walking briskly toward the exit. Facing away from Signore Enzo, Gerald pointed to his right and announced, "And I want that bright yellow Spider, that one in the window." Signore Enzo massaged his temples and contemplated the ways in which he might explain to the pushy, mullet-haired record executive that the yellow convertible

Spider on which the man had made a substantial down-payment was no longer available. Maybe he could talk the mullet into buying a red 360 Modena that was now unexpectedly available.

Gerald walked several blocks west. From a payphone he dialed 873-7328 – the numbers corresponding to TSE-RECT – after first spraying the handset and buttons with a small can of Lysol.

“TS Erection, Tom speaking.” Tom Stull answered the call himself, reinforcing Gerald’s belief that times continued to be tough for Tom. Perhaps he had had to lay off his receptionist.

“Tom, Gerald Pfalzgraf here. How’re you doing? How goes the erection business?” Gerald had to move the telephone receiver away from his mouth to avoid snickering in Tom’s ear.

Caught off-guard, Tom replied, “Uh, um, good. What’s up with you? What can I do for you?”

“I was wondering if you’d like to have lunch with me in the city this week. I have some ideas I’d like to talk to you about.”

Tom’s spirits rose. Maybe Gerald had called to set up a meeting to discuss a lucrative contract he wanted Tom to consider, perhaps a job requiring miles of paving. “Well, sure. I’ve got another appointment at the bank on Thursday morning. Should be available after that.”

“Perfect. Meet me at Sequoia – it’s in the South Street Seaport. Twelve-thirty, OK?” Gerald suggested South Street Seaport because he never went there, no one there knew him, and the place was always crowded with tourists.

Tom replied with a chipper tone in his voice, “Yeah. Twelve-thirty is fine. I’ll see you later.” Gerald placed the handset, doused in disinfectant, back into its cradle. He guffawed aloud to himself, “TS Erection, Jesus H. Christ . . .” haw! haw! “. . . what a schnook.”

Tom immediately called his wife Tori, and as Ralph Kramden often did to Alice when involved in a scheme he began to tell her about an imminent business deal – “no, it’s not for sure, exactly” – that would bring them wealth and salvation. He pronounced “sure” like “shirt” without the “t,” and “for” to rhyme with it, running the two together into a single, moronic-sounding word. “This guy Gerald is loaded – I have a good feeling about this, babe.”

Gerald girded his loins for an encounter he was not looking forward to. He decided to work from home today, opting to confront Oscar after hours. He had sent his toxic employee an urgent email that morning demanding he attend a one-on-one meeting at 6:30 in Gerald's office. Oscar would be shitting bricks all day. *Fuck him.* Gerald had fired many people in his career, but this discussion would be different and Gerald was more than a bit nervous. Around 4, Gerald left his house and went to the Hair where Wren happened to be working a noon-to-8 shift. He slurped down a Macallan and told her about having to meet with Oscar. She assumed he was going to fire him at last.

"I'm really surprised you kept him in your company this long, Ger."

Gerald grabbed a few pieces of venison and smoked rabbit from a plate on the bar – a collection of charcuterie that the head chef prepared in an attempt to distinguish Public Hair from lower-rent establishments – and shoved them in his mouth. The way Gerald consumed the meats, briskly with minimal chewing, suggested to Wren that he didn't appreciate her assessment of how Pfalzgraf Associates dealt with errant employees. "I'll tell you about it later."

Gerald rode the elevator to the eighteenth floor and walked calmly to his office in plain sight of the entire staff including a profusely-sweating Oscar. Oscar figured the Arbogast contract must have fallen through and Gerald would be exacting punishment. He hoped he

might only be docked pay and relieved of his team leadership post. The thought of being terminated caused him to feel faint. It was only 5:30 – he would have to wait another hour to hear the verdict.

At 6:45, everyone was gone except Gerald and Oscar. Gerald poked his head out of his office door and called for Oscar to come in. Oscar let out a long, silent fart, then catching a whiff of the nervous odor frantically fanned the air around him for fear the smell would follow him into Gerald's office.

Oscar knocked on the door. "How are you today, Gerald? Let me say right off how sorry I am for my behavior in front of Arbogast. Completely inappropriate."

"Come in. Have a seat, Oscar. I want to talk to you about something very serious." Gerald was standing at his desk looking at his iMac flat-screen monitor, wiggling the mouse a bit. "I had some software installed a few weeks ago to track what the employees are doing on their workstations. Let me show you what the software reported on your activity."

Oscar felt his mouth go dry and pulse rate increase. Gerald pivoted the screen so Oscar could see a decidedly onerous pornographic image that Gerald had enlarged for easier viewing.

"There's a lot of this kind of material in your folder. I assume you know this not only violates your condition of employment, but is also illegal."

The blood rushing through Oscar's ears almost blocked Gerald's words like noise canceling headphones.

Oscar started to speak haltingly, "I . . . uh, don't know . . . uh, why you think I would access such stuff. I mean, anyone could have used my workstation to . . ." Gerald cut him off expecting this kind of feeble response.

"Look, the software license includes the right for me to call in

the company's people as witnesses to testify on the infallibility of the program." Gerald made that up, but it sounded plausible to Oscar.

Oscar relented, "OK, OK. I got carried away, but it will never happen again, I swear." Gerald remained silent, clicking on a button that brought up another ghastly image. "You're right, Gerald. It was foolish of me and I could've gotten the firm in trouble. I admit it. I'm willing to take a pay cut, give up my vacation. I want to stay with the firm. Please, don't fire me. I'll do anything you want."

Gerald found satisfaction in Oscar's declaration that he was willing to do anything his master wanted. Gerald closed the program revealing a photograph of Villa Savoie as the desktop wallpaper.

"OK. Here's the story. I *am* going to dock your pay, not just for looking at this disgusting smut on company time using company equipment, but also for being a complete asshole at the Arbogast meeting. But I also have a task I want you to perform, something unusual. If you don't agree to perform my task, I will not only fire you but I'll place a call to the Feds who should be very intrigued by your internet browsing habits."

Oscar let out another fart, this time slightly audible and truly noxious. Gerald stepped back a bit.

Oscar's mind was racing now, trying to conjure up some tasks that might qualify as unusual. "Well, uh, sure Gerald. I'll perform a task if it means avoiding dismissal, or jail. What can I do for you?"

"First, let me make it clear that what I'm about to describe to you must be kept in complete confidence. You cannot discuss it with anyone else. Second, things may turn out such that I won't need you to do anything for me after all. If that happens I'll call it even with you. I'm still going to cut your pay but as for the firing and the Feds, I'll let you ride. Understand?"

Oscar nodded. He was thirsty, but a bit less frantic.

Gerald proceeded with the basic outline of a scheme that involved criminal activity, and pretty heinous at that.

“Huh?” Oscar’s eyes widened. “You’re joking, right? I can’t do that!”

“Yes you can, and you will, or you’d better get used to receiving deep, penetrating anal sex from muscular men sporting many tattoos. The person I want you to take care of – I’ll call him ‘Worm’ – will think you are there to give him money so he won’t back away when you get close to him. I’ll pick a time late at night when there will be few if any people around. When you complete the task, take a cab back to the office. I’ll be waiting here to receive your status report. And don’t forget to scratch your balls.”

Oscar pleaded, but Gerald would not relent. “Oscar, this guy I’m talking about has been trying to blackmail the firm claiming to have information about a bunch of code violations that could seriously hamper our ability to bid on contracts, and maybe even bring some stiff litigation upon us. Shit, Oscar, Worm’s a scumbag and we – you – have to make him disappear. There’s no third way.”

Oscar was concerned for the health of the firm but he reserved greater concern for his own personal situation. *This litigation Gerald is concerned about – could it result in confiscation of equipment and subsequent revelation of the kiddie porn files?*

Oscar said softly, “Well, he does sound like trouble. But what if I get caught?”

“No one will find out. People will think it was a random act of senseless violence.”

“Can I think about it overnight?” He let out yet another SBD fart.

“No. I need your answer now, before you leave my office to take a shit. Jesus, Oscar, you really should buy some carbon offsets.”

A minute went by, then a couple more. Oscar stood up, walked to

the window and looked out at the elegantly lighted Flatiron Building shimmering in the fog. He thought about some of the dodgy things he had done as a younger man.

Once, when he was seventeen, Oscar, in a drunken haze ran someone off the road. The victim wound up losing an arm or a leg – Oscar couldn't remember which. He read a newspaper report a couple days later when his hangover subsided. When no one from the authorities knocked on his door after a week he allowed himself to feel a spot of relief.

At RISD, Oscar cheated on exams, stole design ideas from fellow students, plagiarized constantly, and paid former students to construct architectural models for him. More than a few times Oscar slipped drugs into the drinks of Brown girls he met in Providence's college bars, later taking advantage of their impaired states.

"The Flatiron Building looks beautiful tonight, doesn't it Gerald? Looks just like that old Steichen photo in the lobby." Oscar turned toward Gerald now. "Just let me know when you need this thing done."

Gerald smiled ever so slightly. "OK, Oscar. Hey, it might not even be necessary. Who knows? Get your things and go home."

Gerald recalled another nugget from *The Prince*: "It is necessary to know well how to be a great pretender and dissembler; and men are so simple, and so subject to present necessities, that he who seeks to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived."

Oscar put his hands in his pockets, not wanting to shake hands with Gerald.

"Remember, nothing of this to anyone," said Gerald.

Oscar nodded and walked out of Gerald's office.

"One more thing, Oscar."

"Yes?"

“I had a new, clean workstation ordered for you. Don’t ever use it for anything other than work again, not even to check the weather, or I *will* can your ass, and turn you over to the US Marshals.”

Sequoia is a large restaurant located in the South Street Seaport offering terrific views of the East River, the Brooklyn Bridge and the worldwide headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses. They serve up passable cuisine, specializing in seafood and big drinks. The clientele consists mainly of stumbling tourists and Wall Street grunts from the banks and investment firms nearby. These guys are easily identified by their yellow ties and the way they comb their hair straight back like that of their hero Gordon Gekko. Gerald hadn't been to the Seaport in probably a decade, and the time before that was another ten years. He despised the bustling crowd of clueless foreigners almost as much as the stench of the Fulton Fish Market that once occupied space nearby under the FDR Drive. His lengthy absence from the place made it perfect for a meeting with Tom Stull. Gerald was sitting at a two-top on the deck outside, drinking a too-oakey Chardonnay, and blankly watching a mime strut around on the pier below doing the "up against the glass" routine. Just then Gerald's cell phone rang; on the screen appeared the name of the caller: "Morcilla." It was close to 12:30 so Gerald debated whether to answer, deciding to do so.

"Gerald, darling, can you talk?" Morcilla was in an outstanding mood, having just received a call from Signore Enzo announcing his decision to give his favorite customer a complimentary upgrade from the 360 Modena to the sharper, sexier Spider convertible in Giallo Fly Yellow. She boasted to Gerald about how through steady perseverance she had leveraged the upgrade from the shifty Ferrari salesman who a

few weeks earlier had tried to take advantage of her. Morcilla said the words “steady perseverance,” but Gerald heard “relentless antagonism.”

“The difference between the cars has to be worth between twenty and twenty-five thousand, Gerald. See, there’s a lesson there. Je tiens mes promesses, meme celles des autres.” Morcilla laughed. Over the cell phone she sounded avian.

After all the years of marriage to Morcilla, Gerald knew the code words well and he immediately detected in her delivery the telltale sign of superiority. He was just about to challenge Morcilla when he spotted Tom Stull walking up the stairs. Good thing – had Gerald gotten into an argument over Morcilla’s insinuation that her husband needed to learn some kind of lesson, he might have cracked about his role in wresting forth the “complimentary” upgrade.

“Congratulations, Morcilla. I have to go now. See you tonight.”

“OK. I won’t be home until later, Gerald. I’m meeting Vicki to work on the class reunion. Maybe very late.”

Tom approached Gerald’s table wearing steel-toed work boots and his stupid-looking Caterpillar hat. The word “caterpillar” conjured images of slimy worms that Gerald as a child had come to believe could cause serious disorders if their blood were accidentally spattered upon human skin. Even today, in adulthood, the idea of squashing a caterpillar, its lurid innards spilt out from under a sneaker or bicycle tire, turned Gerald’s stomach.

It was precisely 12:30. As a contractor serving picky government agencies and an employer of union labor obsessed with time and its more-favored cousin, time-and-a-half, Tom was sensitive to punctuality. Gerald gave Tom credit for his virtue.

Gerald stood up and extended his hand. “Tom, good to see you again. Glad you could make it. I hope you didn’t have to rearrange your day to meet me for lunch.”

Tom shook Gerald's hand. "No. This is a good time. I had to be in town to meet with the goddamned bank again, anyway. Fucking idiots . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Have a seat. Sounds like you need a drink." Gerald motioned to the waitress, Candy, who had been told to be ready to serve another patron. "You ever been here before, Tom? Y'know, Sequoia? For lunch maybe, or dinner, or just drinks?"

"Never. Sure is a nice view."

"Can I get you another Chardonnay, sir?" asked Candy. She was wearing dark burgundy lipstick – looked almost black – and a row of fifteen small rings pierced through the helix of her left ear.

"Please, and bring me a plate of the linguine with mussels," replied Gerald. Turning toward Tom, "What'll you have, bud?" He was careful not to mention Tom's name in front of Candy or anyone else. Why he chose to call him "bud" he wasn't sure; probably the kind of nickname a man wearing a Caterpillar hat would have. Gerald noticed Tom did not remove the hat when he sat at the table – practically a mortal sin in the Pfalzgraf family.

Tom wasn't prepared to order lunch so quickly, but he didn't know whether Gerald was in a hurry to get back to his office. "Uh, give me a Captain and Coke, not too much ice. And can I just get a cheeseburger, medium rare, and fries?"

"American, Swiss, Cheddar, Pro . . ."

"Cheddar – cheddar is good."

Candy left with the order.

Gerald drank the last swallow of his wine and said to Tom, "Man, I can't believe how many years it's been since we went to that lame school back in Aliquippa. Remember that dunce, Sheila something? Kept the whole class back. Couldn't even turn a fraction into a decimal."

"Yeah, she was stupid but she knew how to give a killer blowjob."

Gerald had come to lunch feeling superior to Tom, but hearing Tom refer to a sexual encounter in grade school at a time when Gerald hadn't yet started masturbating, he felt diminished. When Gerald thought about Sheila he was reminded of arithmetic; when Tom thought about Sheila he recalled killer blowjobs. The difference between the two of them was starker than Gerald imagined.

Trying not to appear surprised – or worse, prudish – Gerald dispassionately continued with the conversation. “I remember that time, for show-and-tell, you brought in a picture of a bear you shot. What grade were we in then?”

“I think fourth. Third or fourth. I bagged him with a 300 Savage right below the ear.” Tom intended to speak a bit more about the details, but Gerald interrupted.

“After high school didn't you join the Army? Someone at one of the class reunions told me you became a sniper.”

“No. I mean, yes. I joined the Army, but I was an SDM, not a sniper.” Gerald furrowed his brow like he didn't understand. Tom added, “SDM – squad designated marksman. Y'know, a sharpshooter. Annie Oakley. I thought about trying out for sniper school but I had a couple of run-ins with the law, mostly smoking and dealing weed, and that's all she wrote. I couldn't meet the qualifications for the school.” Tom instantly concluded he was talking too much. He hadn't seen Gerald Pfalzgraf for more than thirty years and here he was talking right off the bat about getting blowjobs, and smoking weed, and breaking the law. “So, Gerald, what is it you wanted to meet about? Need some paving or construction work done?” The hopefulness in Tom's voice was pitiful.

Candy came with the drinks. Gerald watched Tom ogle Candy's cleavage as she reached over with the Captain and Coke. Tom tried lamely to hide his optic intrusion by shrouding his eyes and rubbing

his hand across his brow. Like all men faced with the temptation, Gerald too glanced over at Candy's exposed breasts and caught a glimpse of her nipple, the areola bumpy and pink like bubble-gum. Gerald's penis took an extra gulp of blood and he shifted in his chair, excited by the momentary sighting of Candy's sweetness, which when revealed suddenly, unexpectedly, and unknown to her, proved to be doubly erotic.

"Your food should be out shortly. Is there anything else I can get you right now?" Candy asked.

"Nothing now, thanks," said Gerald. Then to Tom, after Candy departed, "I do need some work done, but it's not what you think. Before I describe it, I want you to know I'm ready to make it very worth your while. I'll help you with your company debts and use my influence with the bank to have them increase your credit line. I'll throw some of my firm's business your way. I'll even try to shut down the investigation into your wife's credit card fraud. That's if you agree to help me." Gerald knew his reference to Tom's wife and her troubles with the law would be an attention-grabber. Surely, Tom would wonder how Gerald came to know about this juicy piece of information. The capabilities of ExaTrac Software Solutions' data-mining application, like those of the employee monitoring program, were indeed impressive just as the saleswoman promised Gerald before he signed the license agreement.

"How do you know about Tori?" asked Tom anxiously. He assumed if Gerald knew about his wife's elaborate but flawed eBay scam, then he might also recognize that Tori's problems outweighed those of TS Erection. TS Erection might default on some loans, and worst-case, file for Chapter 11. Or was it Chapter 7? Tom could never remember which was more onerous. But Tori was facing a potential felony rap, and all the baggage that entails.

Gerald replied, "I know a lot of things. I know that if you turn down my offer I'll respond with more than an equal and opposite reaction. I'll convince the bank to tear your lungs out. The only way you'll be able to fill a pothole will be to take a crap in it. And your wife? See ya." Gerald had considered making a mockery of the company's ludicrous name by referring to it as TS Erectile Dysfunction or TS Flaccid, but none of it seemed clever enough.

Now, Tom was a tough SOB running a respectable-sized construction company with nearly a million in annual revenues. He dealt with union stewards threatening slowdowns and sick-outs, and douche-bag ticket-writers from OSHA. He knew a hundred different ways to tell lawyers to go fuck themselves. He was expert at determining the proper amount of grease to apply to politicians, and the appropriate way to deliver the payoff. Until recently, Tom walked all over loan officers. Still, he was flummoxed by the bluntness of Gerald's diatribe.

Gerald thought he might have been a bit too dramatic, too Frank Miller, but he felt an indescribable urge to rebalance the relationship with Tom after learning that Tom had scored oral sex a full seven years before Gerald had.

Tom recovered his footing a bit after working up some indignity at the way Gerald calmly took a sip of Chardonnay after delivering his insulting tirade. "Listen here, motherfucker!" Some people sitting at tables on the deck glanced uncomfortably toward Tom. He lowered his voice. "I work hard, my friend. I can appreciate the offer of assistance but I certainly don't like your tone. I definitely don't like your threats. What do you really want?"

"Relax, Tom. You haven't even heard what the job is about. I'm very confident you'll take the job and reap the rewards. Let's put the downside part of the equation off to the side, OK? You're pretty familiar with the section of Interstate 80 that runs through Jersey, right?"

“Yeah, sure. We’ve done a lot of paving, bridge work, shit like that on I80.”

“And I know you’re a great shot.”

“Huh? So fucking what?”

Candy put down the large tray on a folding table next to Gerald, and placed the plate of steaming, gamy mussels and linguini in front of Tom, who pointed to Gerald. “I’m sorry,” she said, serving the plate to Gerald. She gave Tom his cheeseburger. Gerald rolled his eyes; it was beyond his comprehension how anyone above the level of imbecile could cross up meals for a table of two. But hey – she probably gives killer blowjobs.

“Can I get you guys anything else right now?” Tom lifted the bun off the sandwich to apply a daub of ketchup, discovering the absence of cheese. Fuck it, he thought.

“Nothing for me,” Tom replied.

As Candy left the table, Tom continued to Gerald, “So what if I’m a good shot? What does that have to do with anything?”

“I know this sounds strange, but I want you to take a few random potshots at some vehicles driving on I80.” Tom stopped chewing the bite of burger and held the gob of meat and bun in a pocket in his left cheek. Had he heard Gerald correctly?

“I’ll give you the exact time and location later. You’ll shoot a few semi trailers, maybe some dump trucks. Do nothing to interfere with the drivers. Around the exact time you’re taking these shots, someone will be driving an unmistakable car on the highway. The top will be down. You won’t miss it. Make that one a head shot.”

Tom sat up straight, swallowed the gob and cocked his head as if he were looking at a madman. He placed a fry in his mouth to mask his incredulity. Gerald continued, “You have to get out of there *tout d’suite*, as I know you can given your extensive familiarity with the I80

corridor. And don't leave any cartridges or other evidence at the scene. That should go without saying."

Tom struggled to swallow the fry, then said in a quasi-whisper, upper body bent close to the table, face uncomfortably close to Gerald's, "Are you crazy? Jesus Christ! What if I get caught? I could get life – maybe even the fucking chair." Tom sat back, pulling his face away from Gerald's. In a slightly louder voice, "Go to hell, mother-fucker." Near the bar, Candy turned toward Tom and then looked at Gerald for evidence of a looming altercation.

Gerald smiled and replied slowly, for Tom was clearly agitated, "Tom, calm down. Listen to me. You're not going to get caught because the whole thing will go down in the span of a few minutes. By the time the cops get to the scene you'll be back at your job site. They'll figure they have some deranged killer on their hands, like the DC sniper, not a construction executive. And they'll focus their energy on making plans to catch him when he strikes again. What else could they do? But you're never going to strike again. The shootings will remain an unsolved mystery, I promise."

"And for doing this you'll bail me and Tori out of our legal and business problems? Why? Who's gonna be driving the car?"

"That's none of your concern. The less you know the better. Suffice it to say you'll be doing my company a major favor by eliminating a cocksucker who means to bring me down. This guy is killing my business just like the bank is killing yours." Gerald hoped to liken his predicament to Tom's and to portray the killing, at least a little bit, as an act of justice to ease Tom's trepidation. He continued directly, "And yes, it's important enough for me to bail out your business. And help out on Tori's problem with the government."

"You know if I get caught, you're going down with me," Tom replied in a test of Gerald's commitment.

“Tom, you’re not going to get caught. I have high confidence in you. I also have fifty K in tens and twenties set aside – my fifty percent down-payment . The rest of the money and the other favors will come after the deed is done.”

“No good. It’ll cost you way more than that. A quarter mil. You’re talking murder here my friend.” Tom figured that by setting such a high figure he might push the conversation into a negotiation phase that would run out the clock on lunch and give him more time to think.

A devoted student of Nicolo Machiavelli following his father’s death, Gerald was inherently suspicious of people who might be enemies lurking close by, waiting patiently for him to make mistakes. He found credence in the old Viet Cong observation that “the people are the water; our armies are the fish,” and likened his would-be enemies to the fish who swim undetected among the waters of his ostensible friends and colleagues. Gerald often wondered what he might do should he ever become entrapped in a situation from which extrication required huge sums of cash. Or should he ever become so toxic with one or more dangerous persons that he would need a safe haven to hide from those same people seeking justice or revenge. He needed options, one or more unconventional insurance policies to hedge against the day he might step too far over the line and need to disappear for a long time, perhaps forever.

When he was about thirty Gerald carefully and with meticulous attention to detail began to develop an alternate identity by the name of “Paul Geraci,” creating a plausible foundation for the alias in case he ever needed to start a new life. To support the alias Gerald acquired credit cards, a social security number and a college degree for the phantom Paul Geraci. He applied for and received a valid US passport, but after 9/11 Gerald found the challenge to renew it had increased

all out of proportion. He continued to maintain Geraci's Austrian and Venezuelan passports, however. Through bureaucratic sleight-of-hand, Paul Geraci established an employment record and even paid income taxes. In addition to setting up his alternate identity, Gerald slowly and methodically squirreled away hundreds of thousands of dollars in all-cash denominations, as well as Krugerrands, loose diamonds and bearer bonds. Gerald found it extremely useful and persuasive to solve problems with large amounts of cash and equivalents.

"I meant to say 'my twenty percent down payment.' OK?" Gerald twirled the last few strands of linguine around his fork and slurped them down. He put his fist over his mouth and slowly let out a burp caused by the trace amounts of mussel feces in the sauce. He hoped he wouldn't suffer a repeat of the nausea he experienced after eating the steak tartare at Pastis. Today, he was riding the subway and wouldn't have Mustapha to chauffeur him to a park to blow chunk.

"Shit. I had you pegged all wrong when I saw you in the bank the other day. You're a scumbag. Maybe even worse than me." Tom replied.

Candy came back to the table. She asked Tom, who was still eating, "How are we doing? How's the cheeseburger? Good?"

"You forgot the fucking cheese, doll. Other than that, *we* are doing fine."

She narrowed her eyes, then made a half attempt at a sincere smile and an apology. Gerald asked for the bill. Candy left with some dishes, giving Tom the mental finger.

"What's it going to be, Tom?"

Tom considered the prospect of saving both Tori and TS Erection. Then he began the rationalization process. *If this guy is as big a parasite as Pfalzgraf claims, I guess it wouldn't be too horrible to X him. It wouldn't be that much different than greasing gooks.* The Vietnam War had ended by

the time Tom joined the Army and he had never got to grease any gooks, or anyone else for that matter, but through his training he was convinced he could do it with ease if called upon. Tom tried another angle with himself. *I'll be shooting from a couple hundred yards at most. It'll be like picking off prey in the woods. I won't even have to see who I'm shooting.*

“What the hell,” Tom replied to Gerald. “Sounds like this guy deserves a shot in the head. When do I get the money?”

Gerald smiled more broadly than he wanted to. “We’ll get it done right away. You just sit tight and wait for my call with the details on when and where. Just don’t talk to anyone about any of this, including Tori. When the time comes the pressure will be off her and you can take quiet credit for everything.”

Tom noticed a huge lighted sign on the roof of a building across the East River: “Watchtower.” He took a sip of his Captain and Coke. “My grandmother was a Jehovah’s Witness. My mother’s mother. Man, what ideas she had. My mother couldn’t do anything fun. When she was a kid she wasn’t allowed to go to the movies, and she couldn’t go out on Halloween. Instead of going door-to-door for candy she went door-to-door trying to convert people. And what shit she took from them. Most slammed the door in her face, but some got pretty belligerent. One time a Nazi skinhead aimed a crossbow at them. I guess he didn’t appreciate the intrusion.”

Gerald smirked and put on his sunglasses.

Tom continued, “My grandmother made my mother carry a card that said she wouldn’t take blood, even if she was in a car wreck. Eventually, she left the Witnesses and her mother never spoke to her again. ‘Disfellowshipped’ they called it.” Tom finished his Captain and Coke. “OK, you know how to reach me, pal. I hope it’s not gonna take too long. I’ve got to get things settled with the bank and get Tori out of her fix.”

Gerald thought back to a report he had watched on CNN shortly after 9/11 about a poisonous substance called ricin, a derivative of simple castor beans which are also the source for oils used in paints, linoleum, crayons and products found on most drug store shelves. It's as old-fashioned as witch-hazel and Burma Shave. The CNN piece retold the story of the bizarre KGB assassination of Georgi Markov, the Bulgarian playwright and dissident. The event came to be known as the "Umbrella Murder" after Markov died of a minor stab wound to the leg inflicted by a passerby with a ricin-tipped umbrella while strolling along the Waterloo Bridge in London.

At a local internet café, Gerald studied the advisory material on the website of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and was particularly intrigued by the assessment that a person poisoned with an amount of ricin the size of a grain of salt could die within twelve hours. Inhalation of ricin is particularly effective. It was also heartening to learn that death by ricin is very difficult to determine if no one suspects it to be the cause in the first place. Gerald was impressed that no antidote to ricin exists. Through the wonders of the internet Gerald discovered in a foreign patent database a documented method for making ricin that involves processing the leftover waste after pressing the beans to extract oil. The US Patent and Trade Office had purged it from their databases but several less-strident countries let it stand. The sum total of ricin's attributes made it an extremely effective murder weapon. Of course it had to be handled with extreme

caution but Gerald felt confident he could safely make enough of the stuff to put the kibosh to a particular Serbian SOB.

Under the ruse of making a return visit to Burkina Faso, Gerald had begun arranging travel plans to Africa where the castor bean plant is a native species until he discovered to his pleasant surprise that several specialty nurseries in New Jersey cultivated the plant and sold them as ornamentals. He rented a van and embarked on a day-long trip, buying a single plant with cash from each of four different vendors around the state along with other nondescript flowering plants set in large pots. Gerald was inexpert in the discipline of gardening but he found himself peculiarly attracted to foxgloves. In the van, he transferred the castor bean plants into the larger pots of foxgloves, and late that evening schlepped the four pots onto the elevator and up to the empty seventeenth floor below Pfalzgraf Associates' offices – the floor Gerald was planning to develop into additional office space. There, Gerald placed the plants in the corners near the windows, hiding the castor bean plants in plain sight.

Gerald went to Williams-Sonoma in the Time-Warner Building and purchased a home olive-oil press. And at the internet café he copied the ricin process by hand into a notebook. Gerald was now ready to concoct a deadly mixture of cocaine laced with a couple milligrams of Pfalzgraf's special home-made ricin. He smiled devilishly when he envisioned Sinisa snorting a few lines, wiping up his nostrils, and then within a few short hours, falling into convulsions before dying a gruesome death. No doubt, authorities would chalk up his death to an overdue overdose.

Gerald organized a surprise birthday party for his aging mother – *could she really be seventy-five?* Using the occasion as an excuse to stay a few days in the house in which he grew up, Gerald planned to make

the ricin in the darkroom he had set up in the basement as a teenager. He chose a date when he knew Morcilla could not accompany him. Morcilla liked Gerald's mother quite a bit, so she was annoyed at Gerald's inadequate planning skills. Her harping only served to invigorate Gerald and focus his attention on his appointed task.

In the basement, underneath a box of long-outdated Kodak paper and pouches of Dektol, Gerald found a bunch of 8-track tapes he assumed had been discarded. Among them was *Funhouse* by the Stooges, a classic that Gerald hadn't heard since Wren was born. He scrounged around the basement eventually turning up the portable, monaural 8-track player his father bought him the year he died. The orange 8-track player was spherical and had a slot like a mouth for the cartridge. When Gerald inserted *Funhouse* into the slot, the 8-track player looked like a psychotic Jack-o-Lantern. There could be no better musical accompaniment than "Dirt," "Down on the Street" and "Loose" while concocting a deadly brew to vanquish the evil beast threatening the love of one's life.

Prior to making the trip to Aliquippa, Gerald had removed several castor beans from each plant – more than enough to produce a lethal quantity of ricin. Following the harvest Gerald carefully removed the castor bean plants and stuffed them into a paper grocery bag. After a sumptuous dinner by himself at Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Perry St., Gerald took the plants and flowers from the bag and tossed them into the Hudson River where they intermingled with logs, Styrofoam and deck furniture that had floated down from locations a hundred miles upriver. Anyone watching would think he was memorializing a dead loved one and leave him alone.

In the darkroom Gerald wore a Gulf War I environmental safety suit with a built-in gasmask he bought at a surplus store on Canal Street, and did his chemistry in the deep sink basin where the bad

shit could be safely washed away. He placed the castor bean extract in a food dehydrator which after several hours rendered the paste into a dried, powdery mass. During that time Gerald took his mother and some of her bridge club friends to dinner – Max & Erma’s, her birthday choice. Back at his mother’s house he mixed several milligrams of extracted ricin with a few grams of the high-quality cocaine Chappy Hardwick lost in Gerald’s guest room while getting blown by his pre-op boyfriend. Gerald packaged the concoction into a Ziploc bag which he then vacuum-sealed into another clear bag using a device made for preserving leftovers. He inserted the leftover bag into a two-foot length of large-diameter copper pipe, the kind used to channel waste water into the sewer system. Gerald closed the ends of the pipe by sweating on two copper caps. He stuffed all the equipment, the safety suit, and detritus into a plastic garbage bag which he then carefully placed into a large piece of luggage. He taped the edges of the luggage to protect against leakage.

Gerald kissed his always-proud mother goodbye and headed home along I80 in a rented Toyota Camry. He made a side trip toward David Arbogast’s compound, and when he got within a mile of the gate, he pulled over to the side of the road and hid the luggage beneath a pile of sticks and leaves behind a stone wall erected in the early nineteenth century by a long-forgotten farmer. In a few days, Gerald would be back out to Arbogast’s to inspect the progress on the museum site, at which time he would combine the luggage with the several hundred yards of stone and construction material in a dump truck destined for a landfill in a remote Pennsylvania county where the deer population exceeds that of humans two to one.

Gerald paid in cash for a round-trip ticket on New Jersey Transit from Penn Station to Atlantic City. To travel without leaving an electronic trail of his movements he endured a painful three-hour trip aboard the Northeast Corridor, the River Line and the Atlantic City Line. As he approached AC and first glimpsed the casinos in the distance, he couldn't help recalling a bit of folklore regarding the plight of Wolfgang Mozart – how on occasion as a young boy he would faint when hearing a musical note played wildly off-key. Poorly executed music was more than an irritation for Mozart – it could be physically debilitating. An errant, brassy blast from a trumpet, for example, could have the same effect upon the musical genius as a blow to the head with the same offending instrument. Congruently, to a serious, well-educated and experienced architect, as Gerald considered himself, the garish casino buildings and hideous parking garages were akin to a physical assault. These structures painted in wild colors, adorned in miles of neon, and built from cheap materials caused Gerald a good deal of discomfort.

After arriving in the land of salt-water taffy Gerald directed the cab driver to take him to Trump's place, where he then took another cab to Bally's. Later on, he would go to the Borgata Hotel and Casino in the hope of encountering Sinisa. Gerald had reason to believe the Serb would be there because of the nerve-rattling story Wren relayed to him just one day earlier suggesting just that.

Wren was working at Public Hair. She told Gerald she had just

walked back to the bar from the kitchen after retrieving a couple quarts of simple syrup. Sinisa, clearly coked up, walked tentatively into the Hair. He did not extinguish his cigarette. Wren advised him to leave before he got into trouble with the bouncer.

“You shouldn’t be in here, Sinisa.”

“I’m only gonna stay a minute. Y’know, you’re still the most beautiful piece in New York. And the sexiest.” He flashed a cheesy grin.

“Please leave.”

Sinisa stared for a moment, maintaining his grin, and took a long drag on his cigarette. He added as he exhaled smoke, “I still love you.” Wren grimaced. She wanted to walk away but feared turning her back on Sinisa. “And if you love me just a little bit, if you don’t hate me too much, you’ll help me. I need your help. I need money fast – a hundred grand.” He stepped to the edge of the bar and hiked his foot onto the rail.

Wren’s lips parted in disbelief, and before she could respond, Sinisa continued, chuckling, “I mean, I’m not asking you for a hundred grand. I just came here to get whatever you can give me.” Wren noticed he didn’t say “loan me.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have any money to loan. Maybe you should sell your BMW.”

Sinisa exhaled a stream of smoke that quickly enveloped Wren’s head, and then with an elevated level of agitation in his voice, said, “I already sold the fucker. Bring me a Grey Goose.”

“I’m not allowed to serve you.”

Sinisa slammed his palm onto the bar, rattling a row of martini glasses. “Bitch! Bring me a drink!” Wren learned from experience that when Sinisa was in such a state the best course of action was to accommodate him. She poured him his drink. Sinisa continued, “If you don’t have any money, how is it you can afford to go to NYU. Don’t deny it.

I know you're going there. I saw a letter from them in your mailbox." The admission stunned Wren.

"How many teachers you fuck there?"

Wren was disturbed by Sinisa's vulgarity and more so by his invasion of her privacy. She pleaded meekly, "Please just go. I don't have any money. If you want the jewelry back, I'll return it to you." She was referring to the matching David Yurman bracelet and necklace that Sinisa gave her one Christmas. He bragged how he spent \$50,000. Wren assumed that figure was an exaggeration but she truly believed the gift was valuable; an appraiser later told her the set was worth \$10,000. Still, if Sinisa fell for a scam and believed the jewelry was really worth close to fifty grand she might get him off her case by returning it.

"Oh, c'mon Wren – that was a gift from me to you. I can't take . . ." Before he could finish his sentence Wren announced, "Horst will be coming in soon." Horst was the six-foot-six bouncer who dressed exclusively in tight black Armani. Patrons of Public Hair regularly mistook him for a young Dolph Lundgren and asked for his autograph. Sinisa vaguely recalled the last time he encountered Horst. The details were blurry but he remembered stumbling into a table and knocking food to the floor.

"Uh, I see. OK. Well, I have another idea." Wren puffed her cheeks in exasperation. "How about you leave the back door unlocked after you leave tonight? I'll do the rest. Whaddya think?"

"What do I think? Go fuck yourself, that's what." No sooner did she say it that she instantly regretted inciting Sinisa's wrath, pouring gasoline on his smoldering embers. Sinisa's eyes widened and he made a threatening move toward the bar. Just then, to Wren's great relief, Sinisa's cell phone rang. He stepped away from the bar and dropped the phone on the floor. After blurting an obscenity in Serbian, he

picked up the phone and flipped it open. He lit another cigarette. Wren watched intently as he spoke to the person on the other end – a man, she assumed, that he called “Marz.” Sinisa nervously paced back and forth like a caged puma, sometimes facing Wren and sometimes facing away. She could only make out snippets of the conversation. Sinisa abruptly slapped the phone shut and walked back to the bar. The insanity in his eyes was frightening. “That was Marz, in case you want to know. I saw you trying to listen in.” He gulped down the rest of his Grey Goose. “Know what I’m gonna do to Marz?”

Wren shook her head. She said nothing.

“I’m gonna cut off his thumb. Do you know why?”

More frantic head shaking.

“Cause he owes me ten grand. That’s right. That cocksucker has the balls to ask me for more time. Well, I’m gonna take a little trip to AC to meet Mr. Marz and I’m gonna take what belongs to me no matter what. And when I get back from the Borgata I’m gonna take you back too – you belong to me, Wren! To me!”

“Get the fuck out of here!” Wren’s scream was louder than expected. Horst bolted from the kitchen into the bar area to attend to the outburst. The sheer mass of the man – clad in tight black Armani, his huge head topped with a vicious military haircut – awed Sinisa. He seemed even bigger than Sinisa remembered. Before Sinisa could beat a retreat Horst rushed toward him and took a firm grasp of his left arm and the scruff of his neck. Sinisa screamed like a mental patient being taken against his will to a session of medieval electro-shock therapy, “Get off me, man! Let me go!” Wren allowed herself a tiny smile of satisfaction at the turn-about. Almost out the door Sinisa broke free from Horst’s grip and pivoted toward the big man. Wren fully expected Sinisa to lunge foolishly at Horst but all he did was readjust his clothing, blow a kiss toward Wren, and walk civilly out of the bar.

Gerald checked into a snazzy suite at Bally's under the name of his alias Paul Geraci, and after taking a relaxing swim and getting his back waxed, he rode a cab to the Borgata. He played Baccarat for four hours with decent success and relaxed at a high-stakes roulette table, winning several thousand dollars playing a variety of numbers, concentrating most of his chips on 22 black, 27 red and 00. Twenty-two black came up twice in a row, paying off handsomely for Gerald who had let his winnings ride, just like the poor Bulgarian refugee in *Casablanca*.

Around 8 p.m. Gerald called the front desk from a house phone around the corner from the brightly lit lobby. He asked to be put through to a guest of the hotel – a Mr. Sinisa Ražnatovi . The clerk made him repeat the name a couple times, and each time Gerald modified the pronunciation slightly.

“I have a Mr. Ražnatov Sinisic. Would you like to be connected to him?” Just then, Gerald remembered that Wren had mentioned her ex-boyfriend traveled at times under an alias, transposing his first and last names.

“Uh, no thanks.” Gerald hung up quickly, a bit startled to verify the bastard was in fact staying at the Borgata even though this was the situation he had hoped for. He waited an hour to review his plans and to allow some time to elapse after contacting the desk clerk, and then strode up to the front desk holding a large manila envelope.

“Would you please give this to Mr. Sinisic?” Gerald spelled the name for the clerk, a striking woman with blue-black skin and elaborately coiffed hair. “It's for his meeting tomorrow.” The clerk accepted the package with a smile.

Gerald couldn't help himself. “You are one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. I mean it. Where are you from?”

After sizing up Gerald to determine if he might be drunk or

deranged, the clerk answered, "Ivory Coast. Have you ever been there, sir?"

"Ah, Côte d'Ivoire. Non, mais j'ai été à Burkina Faso. Ouagadougou." That was the extent of Gerald's ability with French, so he continued in English, "I was invited to Ouagadougou by a colleague to . . . uh, well, I just went there for a vacation. It was nice." Gerald was about to tell the clerk about all the examples of wonderful architecture in the capital city of Burkina Faso when he stopped himself from revealing too much information. Gerald wrapped up the nascent conversation abruptly. "Thank you." He turned and walked away from the front desk, leaving the clerk to wonder what that was all about.

Inside the envelope Gerald had sealed a letter and two gray Borgata chips, each bearing the mark of its value: \$5,000. Gerald acquired them after cashing in his Baccarat and roulette winnings along with additional chips he purchased at different cage locations throughout the day. Gerald composed the letter on an old typewriter he bought at a garage sale while traversing the New Jersey countryside in search of castor bean plants, and subsequently stuffed into a Salvation Army box when he was finished with it.

The letter did not address Sinisa by name. It simply requested that he accept the enclosed \$10,000 in lieu of carrying out his original task, so that he may concentrate on a job that would pay considerably more. Gerald thought about typing "an order of magnitude more" but decided against it, certain that it would baffle a dunce like Sinisa. He insinuated that he knew something of Sinisa's abilities from a gambler colleague who was a recidivist deadbeat, and had been viciously punished for being so. Gerald took a chance and described a generic gambler who had suffered broken ribs, a right arm and his jaw.

The letter closed as follows:

"If you are interested in hearing my proposal, go to the casino

floor tomorrow at 8 p.m. and sit at the far end of the minimum stakes roulette table closest to the ATM machine. Hand a bet to the croupier and ask him to place it in the basket. I will then attempt to make a bet that exceeds the table maximum. The croupier will call me off, and we shall then know each other's face. I will take back my bet and leave the table. After eleven more spins, you will leave the table and go to B Bar. I will meet you there presently."

The next morning Sinisa woke from a killer hangover; his eyelids, glued by hardened mucus, struggled to open. The first thing he saw was a red light flashing on his phone. A message. Seems he has a package waiting for him at the front desk.

"Well, bring it up to me, asshole! Jesus Christ! Why do you make me call you for it?"

Sinisa read and reread the letter several times while simultaneously flipping one of the \$5,000 chips across the backs of his fingers like poker players absent-mindedly did on TV. He repeatedly dropped the chip on the carpet. The accurate description of the "beaten colleague" impressed Sinisa, thus lending the letter-writer a high degree of credibility, and the chips were clearly authentic. Sinisa didn't know what to make of the fact that the value of the chips totaled to the exact amount he had come to AC to collect from Marz. Was this a coincidence or did the letter-writer know it as a fact? And if so, how? Perhaps because Sinisa was so close to defaulting on his debt to his boss, and feared the consequences, he brushed aside his concerns and decided to check out the proposal.

Very close to 8 p.m. Sinisa identified the roulette table where he would meet this would-be benefactor – it was near an ATM machine fronted by a long line of losers suffering withdrawal from spending time away from gambling. The table was surrounded by middle-aged

white men and women who obviously shopped for clothing at Target, and by darker-skinned young men sporting jagged-edged tattoos and contoured hairdos sculpted by an electric trimmer. The noise on the floor was deafening. Sinisa wedged himself onto a stool at the far end of the table, practically stepping into the forbidden zone behind the velvet rope where the croupiers and pit bosses ply their trades.

Sinisa laid down two \$20 bills on the felt and asked for dollar chips. The croupier started to push two stacks of brown chips toward Sinisa.

“Not brown. No good. Give me green.”

“Certainly, sir.”

The pit boss, well-dressed and holding a clipboard kept an eye on Sinisa for several long seconds before resuming oversight of the tables under his supervision.

Chips of all colors covered the roulette table and the gamblers continued to add more. The croupier set the ball in motion counter-clockwise against the direction of the slowly spinning wheel. Sinisa plucked five chips off his stack and called to the croupier, “Put this in the basket.” She took his bet and placed it on the intersection of 0, 00 and 2.

Just then, Gerald, who was standing near the wheel, placed a \$500 chip on 27 red. The croupier picked it off the table and handed it back to him. “Sir, the maximum bet allowed at this table is \$100.” Sinisa snapped his head to the left to catch a look at Gerald, making brief eye contact. Gerald was wearing a wild-looking lavender Versace suit with broad grey stripes and a loud, paisley Etro shirt adorned with a tie of the same color as Morcilla’s new Ferrari Spider. He had on a pair of eyeglasses shaped like parallelograms. It would be easy for Sinisa to locate Gerald later in B Bar.

Gerald took back the chip, turned and walked away from the

table. Indicating “no more bets,” the croupier waved her hand across the table like a magician trying to prove there are no wires involved in the levitation trick. The white ball bounced around for a second or two before diving into the slot for 27 red. A few people who had been paying attention gasped. One guy with zigzags carved into his wiry hair exclaimed, “Fuckin’ A. Did you just see that? That dude woulda won like seventeen grand.” The croupier raked thousands of dollars worth of chips, paid off winners, lifted the glass cylinder off of 27, and the process started all over again. Sinisa hung around for a few more spins, losing all his money playing 27 red in the belief that this man in a purple suit possessed some kind of supernatural abilities.

According to the Borgata, “B Bar is at the center of it all,” but Gerald chose to duck into a remote booth in a corner where conversations could unfold and develop in confidence. Sinisa strode in wearing black jeans manufactured purposely to appear oily, and a snot-green Member’s Only jacket. He was stocky, full-faced, and wore his wavy dark hair combed straight back. He had a slight underbite. *How in hell did Wren end up with this guy?* For a few beats, Gerald was dumbfounded by the concept before clearing his mind for the encounter with the evil Sinisa.

Sinisa climbed into the booth with its high-backed seat, lit a cigarette, and sat there silently. Gerald noted the redness around Sinisa’s nostrils, and how he inhaled smoke from his mouth back up through his nostrils like an arrogant Frenchman. A long-legged waitress pitched up even higher on fuck-me cha-chas arrived to take a drink order. Gerald was already working on a Macallan, folding his ear in and out. Sinisa ordered Grey Goose. As the waitress walked away with her empty tray, Sinisa bent his torso way out of the booth to watch her

ass toggle to the left and to the right. Gerald watched too, suddenly becoming very thirsty.

“My name is Geraci. I don’t want to know your real name, Mr. Sinisic. I need a man of your evident and proven skills to solve a problem for my client.” Gerald took a sip of the scotch, eighteen years old by his estimation.

“You’re a mysterious person, Mr. Geraci. How do you know about me? About what I do or don’t do? What I might or might not do? What makes you come to me with your ten thousand dollars? What makes you think I will do something for you?” Gerald prepared to speak at the end of each question, opening his mouth then holding his tongue in hesitation as Sinisa posed another question. When Sinisa abruptly stopped talking, Gerald sat slack-jawed for an awkward moment – “I . . . uh . . . um . . .” – waiting for one more question. Finally, when he concluded Sinisa was done talking for the time being, Gerald said, “I’ve seen your handiwork. Impressive. You have something of a reputation among a class of unlucky gamblers. The kinds who are forced to finance their habits with loans they can’t get from their local credit union. I’m acquainted with someone who knows a few of them in passing, and they all say the same thing: you are very good at persuading them to pay their debts.”

Miss Long-legs came with the drinks, and then toggled her shapely, perfectly balanced ass back to the bar.

Sinisa asked, “How is it you know Marz? Is that jizzbag a friend of yours?” He picked up the squat glass of Grey Goose.

Gerald hesitated for a nanosecond. Should he confirm he knows the man, thereby reinforcing the logic of offering ten grand to Sinisa to forget Marz and take a new job? That would seem convincing. However, if he acknowledges knowing Marz, Sinisa may press for further details on how that came to be. How would he explain that?

“Who’s Marz? Is he from Uranus?” As soon as he uttered the cheeky, offhand comment Gerald knew he had been a bit too cute, and he got the response he now dreaded.

Sinisa slammed the glass on the table. “What the fuck did you just say?” He started to rise from the seat. Gerald recalled in horror Wren’s nose-biting story back at the Chink restaurant. Gerald placed his palms on the table top.

“Listen, man. I don’t know Marz. Nothing.” Gerald tried to act cool but he came off sounding like a pussy. “I simply offered you ten grand to convince you to come do a job for my client. It has absolutely nothing to do with anyone named Marz.” Sinisa slowly sat back down. “One of the guys you beat up told me you stay here sometimes. I just came to the Borgata hoping to meet you. And here we are. Relax. Let’s do some business. My client has a job worth a hundred grand to you. What do you say?”

Sinisa cocked his head back at the mention of \$100,000. He brought the Grey Goose to his lips, keeping one eye on Gerald from behind the edge of the glass. Sinisa pondered about how a hundred grand equated to a get-out-of-jail-free card, a wiper of slates clean.

“OK. OK. I don’t understand why you talk about anuses. Tell me about the job.”

Gerald suppressed the urge to smile with relief upon hearing Sinisa’s demand to learn more.

“There is an employee in my client’s company who has information that could be damaging to the business. Very damaging. Perhaps enough to cause insolvency for his company and incarceration for my client. You know what insolvency means, don’t you?” Sinisa nodded, having not a clue but assuming it was bad. “This employee has been blackmailing my client for more than a year and he’s jacked up the bill to stay quiet. It’s a problem that can’t be solved by firing him. My client

has concluded this fucking employee must be eliminated once and for all. With prejudice.”

“Your client also wants not to attract suspicion – am I correct?”

Gerald felt like announcing with mock amazement, like Jules in *Pulp Fiction*, “Check out the big brain on Sinisa!” Instead he replied as though he and Sinisa were comrades. “Absolutely. The elimination of this person cannot be connected in any way back to me, my client or his company. You’ll get fifty large when you show up at the meeting place and the rest after you complete the project. I’ll outline the basic plan for you.”

The waitress returned with another round of drinks, assuming correctly that each man engaged in deep discussion would want one. For her keen perception – and perfect ass, balanced like a hand-crafted tourbillon – Gerald would later tip her the \$500 chip he tried to place on 27 red, not to ply his way into her bed, bath and beyond, as she might have expected and in fact desired, but to instill in her a sense of adoration for him.

“Another thing,” Gerald said to Sinisa, “the blackmailer is a pervert. He likes little boys and girls, but boys more. Let me show you something we found on his computer.”

Gerald had learned from Wren that Sinisa revealed the sordid tale of having been repeatedly molested by a priest when he was an altar boy back in Serbia. The tough Serb slumped in the sofa and uncharacteristically cried like a baby as he drunkenly recalled the abuses. Sinisa described how the priest made him hold his grizzled penis while they said prayers – literally, ejaculations – in the sacristy. And how Sinisa, beginning when he was only ten years old, routinely got drunk on altar wine. He was forced to masturbate over pictures in disturbing magazines while the old man shot Polaroids. The priest used the photos to intimidate Sinisa into keeping the abuse secret, as well as to lure new

victims into his lair. Soon and forever after Sinisa became a broken soul. According to Wren, Sinisa occasionally became suicidal when severely drunk and his mind drifted back to his altar boy days in dreary Serbia. Gerald sensed that Sinisa's threats to kill himself constituted another shackle that had kept Wren emotionally connected to the bastard.

Sinisa glanced briefly at the small photos Gerald unfolded on the table, tightened his jaw, sipped his drink, and without taking his eyes off the repulsive images replied in an even, mechanical cadence, "I will kill this cocksucker like I would step on an ant."

A DOCTOR CAN BURY HIS MISTAKES BUT AN ARCHITECT CAN ONLY ADVISE HIS CLIENT TO PLANT VINES.

Frank Lloyd Wright

Gerald walked to 23rd Street and boarded a southbound F train to York Street in up-and-coming DUMBO – Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass. The location was yet another New York City neighborhood rendered down into a clever acronym, joining SoHo, NoHo, NoLiTa, and Tribeca. Actually not so clever, but certainly too cute, thought Gerald. One of Morcilla's financial advisers encouraged her to buy up a few rundown vacant properties in Vinegar Hill just after 9/11 when property values plummeted in the City. Her \$5 million investment was now worth \$50 million, and the rental income each year exceeded the initial outlay. Gerald came to DUMBO on occasion to eat in one of the many trendy restaurants, but today as in the past he came to make some calls from a payphone. Gerald rued the day payphones, a last bastion of anonymity in the burgeoning world of relentless corporate and government surveillance would eventually become extinct.

The subway ride was a bit hairy. As soon as he stepped foot in the car Gerald smelled the odor of a bandaged wound. The car was pretty full and after the doors closed the pungency increased. He glanced around for the source, sighting an obese man reading *El Diario La Prensa*. The right leg of his pants was cut off at the thigh exposing a bandaged limb the shape of a wharf piling – no contours whatsoever, just a cylinder wrapped in gauze which was stained in placed by yellow liquid. Gerald averted his gaze and began gasping through his mouth. At 14th Street he and several other gagging straphangers on the edge of puking scattered for other cars on the train.

From the York Street station Gerald walked a few blocks to

Plymouth Street and made the first of several calls on what would be a very busy Tuesday. He called TS Erection, smirking at the name even now, and was put through to the cell phone of Tom Stull who was on a job site along Interstate 80.

“Tom? Gerald. Can you talk?”

Taken completely off-guard, Tom stammered a bit. Enough time had passed since lunch at Sequoia that Tom had begun to think Gerald had solved his problem another way. Even after receiving a \$50,000 down-payment, some of which he deposited and some of which he hid out of fear of losing the bundle, Tom still believed the plan might not go through. He struggled to balance his fear of being charged with murder with his desire to be bailed out to the tune of another \$200,000.

“Yeah, I can talk. What do you want?”

“I think you know. I trust you are familiar with the Route 604 area of Allamuchy. There’s large stand of trees on a bluff overlooking I80.”

“Yeah, sure. We’re doing work down the road a piece. Nice view of the highway from there.”

“OK. Tomorrow, on or about . . .”

Tom interrupted indignantly, “Tomorrow? Are you fucking nuts?”

“. . . on or about 4 in the afternoon, a bright yellow Ferrari convertible driven by my nemesis and your target will pass over the rise from the west. There’s no way you can miss seeing it – very flashy vehicle.”

“I asked you: are you fucking nuts? I can’t get it together in one day.”

“Yes you can and you will. I have \$200,000 boring a hole in my pocket and you have a very upset bank boring a second hole in your ass. Listen, Tom, this is an opportunity that I can’t let pass. This is the first reliable info I have on the bastard’s exact movements. I can’t be sure when if ever I’ll get such intel. We have to nail him tomorrow.”

Gerald knew Morcilla would be driving the Ferrari back to Manhattan from Stroudsburg following a visit with Vicki, her best friend and maid of honor, to discuss plans for the upcoming high-school class reunion. He knew this fact by peeking into Morcilla's calendar, a meticulous document bound in some rare, exotic animal skin – likely that of an endangered species – and packed with entries for luncheons, dinners, cocktail parties, art openings, museum board meetings, gala fund-raising events. The calendar was calibrated in fifteen-minute increments and maintained by Morcilla's private secretary. No wonder Gerald and Morcilla rarely had sex with each other, and not at all for at least nine months – she was never around. Not that Gerald cared anymore. His wife never seemed to enjoy the act with him, and her jowly jaw line was far from perfect.

Morcilla and Vicki were senior class president and vice-president respectively at an exclusive preparatory school in Bryn Mawr and both went on to attend Carnegie Mellon University. As voluptuous as Morcilla was as a freshman at CMU, Vicki was thin and bony. One time, after a long night of drinking at a dingy bar on campus to celebrate Vicki's twenty-first birthday, Vicki invited Morcilla and Gerald back to her apartment to continue the festivities. Vicki's boyfriend decided to go home instead, having puked several times in the alley behind the bar. Slumping in front of the TV in Vicki's apartment, Gerald quickly passed out – the victim of too many Guinness Stouts and Kamikaze shots. When he came to an hour later, he glimpsed Vicki and Morcilla sitting together on a loveseat in a dark corner kissing each other and moaning. Morcilla's blouse was unbuttoned and her bra was shoved up and out of the way. Vicki fondled Morcilla's large tits and Morcilla pressed her hand into Vicki's crotch. The two kissed each other passionately. Gerald remained motionless as he leered at the two intoxicated girls through eyelids squinted into narrow slits, disguising

his voyeurism as unconsciousness. Gerald always cherished that image for it became the fodder for a lot of masturbation well into his thirties until it faded gradually like an old photograph. When Morcilla announced that Vicki would be her maid of honor, Gerald prayed for the remote possibility that Vicki might accompany the newly-weds on their honeymoon night for a wild *ménage à trois*. It didn't happen; deep down Gerald knew the whole idea was irrational. The moment Morcilla married Gerald she set aside her role as girlfriend and recast herself as wife.

Tom said with resignation in his voice, "Shit, Gerald. Alright. I just want to get it over with. What am I supposed to do afterwards? How do I get the rest of my money?"

Gerald went through a litany of precautions for Tom to take when going to and leaving from the shooting site, instructions on what types of vehicles to shoot at, admonitions about not leaving evidence, turning off his cell phone and any GPS devices, and not making contact with anyone.

"At 10 in the evening take a Path train from your place in Jersey to Christopher Street then take the 1 train to the 14th Street station. Wait at the far south end of the platform. Around 11 a guy dressed like a homeless person will deliver the rest of your payoff. A month later, through a subcontractor I'll hire your firm to pave the parking lot of a mall we're constructing in Ohio. And I'll have a talk with my old fraternity buddy at the FBI about Tori. After that, we never speak again."

The way Gerald described the scheme it sounded simple and straightforward. As Gerald spoke, Tom tried to visualize the situation, imagining himself lying in the dirt scoping the passing traffic, then taking the money shot and scrambling out. He saw himself on the

platform taking the handoff of the bag, and then anxiously riding the train back home to count out the money. His mind drifted.

Gerald concluded, “Don’t forget to pick your ass.”

“Huh? What’s that?”

“Tom, pay attention. My guy will scratch his balls as a signal to you. You reciprocate by picking your ass. Very simple, yes?”

“Oh, right.”

“Are you sure you’ve got it all?” Gerald asked with exasperation.

“Yeah, I got it.”

“Good. Tell it back to me in detail.”

Next on Gerald’s list was a call to Sinisa. After a number of attempts made over the course of an hour followed by a lunch of edamame, smoked eel and foie gras, Gerald finally connected with the Serb. There was a lot of noise on the line, as though Sinisa was standing next to Niagara Falls.

“Geraci here. Tomorrow night.”

Sinisa had been waiting in anticipation for the call. He had had to max out a couple of credit cards to carry himself through a week’s worth of payments to the boss. And the credit card companies were charging an interest rate that rivaled the worst vig demanded by Sinisa from his pitiful clients. He needed that \$100,000 infusion yesterday.

“Mr. Geraci. So nice to hear from you. I’m ready when you are.”

“Remember, the seventeenth floor, not the eighteenth. You’ll find a bag there with the first half of the money, along with a little gift from my client – something he brought back from a recent trip to South America. I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.”

Walking back to the subway station, Gerald felt a bit nauseous. Why had he thought eel and foie gras would go well together? Sweating

as he recalled the sliminess of the liver, Gerald ducked into a small corner deli and bought a bottle of Voss. As wealthy as Gerald was, being charged \$4.50 for frigging water offended him. He got back on the F train and immediately caught a whiff of open sore. At the end of the car was the man with the bandaged wharf piling. Now he was reading *La Rebelión de Atlas*. A dollop of vomit rushed its way to the top of Gerald's throat before he could choke it back down. He was assaulted by the taste of partially-digested eel mixed with greasy fattened goose liver. This time he would have to remain in the subway car while it traveled beneath the East River from Brooklyn to the next stop in Manhattan, East Broadway.

When he finally reached the office, Gerald was pale and lacked his usual energy. His mouth was sweating. He was not looking forward to meeting with Oscar, but it had to be done right then. Gerald called his secretary Claudia to summon Mr. Dupree into his office. Claudia replied that a Mr. Barthelmes had just arrived unexpectedly and requested five minutes of his time.

"Barthelmes? I don't know any Barthelmes."

"He says he met you at your home – a cocktail party. He has some sort of sculpture with him that he wants to show you."

Jesus Christ. What now? "OK. Send him in."

Garth strutted into Gerald's office and actually curtsied before him. He carried with him what appeared to be a scale model of a street scene: a tiny building, a sidewalk, some greenish-grey people, a smudge of crimson.

"Mr. Pfalzgraf. Gerald. I hope I'm not interrupting."

Well, yes, you are. "No, no. Nice to see you. How is Chapst . . . Chappy?"

"I haven't seen him, nor do I care to. I wanted to apologize about that evening. Please rest assured I never made a pass at your client, and

I most certainly have never had sexual relations with a bird.” Garth rolled his eyes to the ceiling as if the allegation was untrue but within the realm of possibility.

“I’ve already forgotten about it. What brings you to my office?”

“As we spoke before, I would be honored to loan one of my sculptures for display in your new lobby. As you can see, I’ve rendered a hideous mob-related hit outside a restaurant down to a small scale.” He pointed to a green glob on the mini-sidewalk, “The victim here, modeled in goose excrement, is sprawled on the sidewalk with blood running from a gunshot wound to the head. What do you think?”

Gerald hesitated. *What do I think? You’re a talentless hack!* “Interesting. Is that piece of shit supposed to be Paul Castellano?”

“Perhaps. Not really – it could be any one of many organized crime figures. I call it ‘Untitled (Insert Title Here).’ I hope you like it. I would be proud if you located it prominently in your lobby, Gerald.”

“Thank you so much Garth. I’ll discuss it with our interior designer and get back to you.” Garth smiled, unsure of Gerald’s disposition. “One more thing, Garth. Who does your nails? They look fabulous.” Gerald enjoyed stringing along fops like Garth.

“It used to be Chappy; now I go to a salon on Fifty-third.” Garth curtsied again and walked backward toward Gerald’s door as though he were taking leave of Queen Victoria or the Dalai Lama. When Gerald was sure Garth was gone, he asked Claudia to send in Oscar.

Gerald had not spoken to Oscar since their earlier conversation about the service Oscar must perform to preserve his job and avoid incarceration. In the interim Gerald reassigned the Arbogast museum project to another senior member of the team. Arbogast took that as a tacit apology from Gerald, and in the end gave Pfalzgraf Associates the nod over Curtain, Wall, Buckley and Company. And for this decision Arbogast exacted a modest consolation from Gerald – not something

as crass as a discount on the price of architecting and constructing the museum, but rather an agreement from Gerald to visit the quarry and personally choose the vein from which the limestone for the project would be extracted. It was Arbogast's way of clarifying for Gerald who worked for whom.

Oscar entered the office looking like he hadn't shaved in a week and smelled like he hadn't showered in a month. He had some ripe pimples on his nose, a malady he hadn't suffered to this extent since his junior high Clearasil days. Oscar's appearance helped Gerald forget his own discomfort for a moment.

"Are you alright Oscar? You look like shit. Sit down. We have important work to do tomorrow night."

The meeting Oscar dreaded had finally arrived. Gerald would be instructing him to carry out the plan described previously in great detail.

Oscar said in a small, tinny voice, "I was kind of hoping you were going to tell me that Worm went away somehow."

"No, he didn't go away somehow, Oscar. The son-of-a-bitch is all too alive and well. Just the other day I had to bribe him not to contact Arbogast and scotch the deal on the museum. Cost me fifty K." Oscar shook his head in feigned disgust to show camaraderie with his boss.

Gerald continued, "Don't go soft on me. The job is a cinch to pull off and then you'll be on the road to recovery. After you get it done, I'll reinstate your pay to the level it was before and assign you to a new client. You're a good architect, Oscar. Don't blow it now."

Oscar was lifted by the compliment, "a good architect."

"A new client? Really? Jeez, Gerald, that would be outstanding. And all that crap with the internet – that goes away, too, forever. Right?"

Gerald closed his eyes, interlaced his fingers and nodded serenely

like a Bodhisattva in an attempt to convey reassurance. Oscar pushed his crusty hair out of his eyes and in doing so felt several newly-emerged pimples on his forehead. *Man, I must look like a fucking mess.*

“I’m sorry I look so bad, Gerald. I’ve been in a funk lately.”

“On the contrary,” Gerald replied, “you look perfect for tomorrow’s role. Really shitty. Mr. Dupree, you’re ready for your close-up.”

Oscar smiled, trying to remember why that assertion sounded familiar. “OK, Gerald. Tomorrow, as you said. And on Thursday Oscar Dupree starts his life over.”

“That’s what I like to hear, Oscar – confidence. Listen, I’m going to Pennsylvania tonight and I’ll be back tomorrow night. I’ll meet you here alone precisely at midnight to do a debrief.”

“Uh, OK.” Oscar sounded hesitant.

“Hey, the Worm’s going to be plenty surprised, believe me, so don’t worry about anything. You know, you’re going to turn out all right.”

Oscar left the office with a bit of a spring in his step. Gerald resumed working on the details of his plan, dreading the long drive out to Western Pennsylvania to the Arbogast compound and after that to the dusty limestone quarry beyond in Ohio. He still felt queasy from the rich lunch and the poor subway ride.

At 3 p.m., Martina Riehl knocked on Gerald’s door.

“Come in.”

“Are you ready, Gerald? The limo is waiting downstairs.”

Gerald had arranged a meeting with Arbogast and his people to discuss the financials of the museum project. He invited Martina Riehl along, portraying it to her as a professional growth assignment when he actually wanted her to be a witness to his whereabouts. They would soon be on their way across the boring breadth of Pennsylvania, traveling Interstate 80 past at least ten thousand traffic cones lined-up single file along miles of highway for no apparent reason. No evidence existed of ongoing construction or repair work. Like the Terracotta Army of Xi'an, the cones formed an ominous file blocking access to lanes where for years no workers had taken up tools and no form of construction equipment had been operated. Tom Stull often took grief from friends and neighbors about the piss-poor condition of I80, as if he had some control over the State's stewardship of its share of the cross-country thoroughfare. Gerald had made countless trips back and forth across I80 and he swore that at any given time one major section or another would be plagued by the intrusion of the ubiquitous traffic cones. They were nothing less than pure torture for travelers. Forget real estate investments in DUMBO and the Meatpacking District; owning the Pennsylvania traffic cone contract had to be twice as lucrative.

Gerald and Martina arrived at David Arbogast's place around 9:30 in the evening. After passing through the security gate the pair was met by one of Arbogast's full-time, live-in caretakers who escorted them to separate visitor's quarters located at the southern end of the compound. Promptly at 10, a man dressed sharply in a dark suit and black satin tie arrived in a deluxe, four-seater golf cart to take Gerald

and Martina to a late dinner with Arbogast and some of his advisers. Gerald thought it was a bit too late in the day to be eating warm lamb's tongue vinaigrette with chanterelles and a three-minute egg, and beef cheek ravioli with crushed squab liver and black truffles, but he pressed on, betraying no remorse. Martina picked at the tongue on her plate, irritating Gerald who had barely survived another one of his employee's gaffes in front of Arbogast.

Arbogast made a toast to the museum, spoke briefly about the two-day agenda – financial blabbing tomorrow, a visit to the limestone quarry in Ohio the day after that – and instructed one of his advisers to run through a brief PowerPoint presentation illustrating some of the works to be housed in the museum. Gerald struggled somewhat to envision co-locating Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photos with the big steel toys of Koons. Martina stated an opinion about the genius of exhibiting super-sized balloon animals co-located with photos of aroused, Zeppelin-like black penises. She said the juxtaposition would suggest something about the sexuality of childhood. Gerald thought about Oscar and his pathology. He waited for a tart reaction from Arbogast, his asshole puckering in anticipation of a swat-down from the preeminent collector, but instead Arbogast complimented Martina for her impeccable insight.

The night air was surprisingly warm, not a single star was visible, and the moon was new. Gerald and Martina rode in the golf-cart back to the guest quarters. It was past midnight. Gerald could only imagine what the next day would portend. He had tried his best to orchestrate a series of events that would liberate both Wren and him, and secure their future together. He went to bed, head propped up on a stack of pillows to help prevent an acid-reflux attack – highly likely after consuming all the rich food and drink Arbogast's chef whipped on him. He placed a sock over his dick, fantasized about Wren, and beat it hard.

From the bluff overlooking the busy stretch of Interstate 80, Tom had a panoramic view of traffic moving both east and west. And in the prone position among a stand of pines about a hundred yards from the highway he was invisible to the traveling masses. There was no shortage of candidates to fire upon, I80 being one of the busiest and most congested routes for commuters, vacationers, and long-haul truckers transporting cars, cattle, vegetable oil, and cheap plastic shit bound for Wal-Mart stores in the Northeast. The highway was also jammed with local drivers hauling concrete, LP gas, lawn-mowing equipment and the contents of hundreds of portable toilets. Tom saw a fair number of these “Port-o-San” trucks pass by, imagining how awful it must be to suck the treacle out of those polypropylene huts. Just walking within fifty feet of a Port-o-San on a hot summer day could make Tom gag. He thought about shooting the tank on a Port-o-San truck, spawning a vile leak that would extend from Allamuchy to Stanhope, but he recalled Gerald’s instructions: don’t cause any immediate alarm before shooting the guy in the Ferrari. Just stick to a few shots into some big blank trailers, preferably the ass end of a piggy-back. Gerald’s plan was to establish the plausibility of a crazed sniper, someone who had shot at a half-dozen vehicles before killing a driver. He wanted to ensure that no one would notice anything unusual until after the driver’s brains exploded. Later the authorities would identify other bullet holes and settle on the “crazed sniper” theory.

Tom checked his watch again. It was now 3:55 p.m. He could taste the pungency of tension in the back of his dry throat. His mind

was racing – each hemisphere of his brain dueling with the other over whether to complete the mission or back out before he pulled the trigger of commitment. He started to lean toward the idea of simply packing up his gear and getting back to the job site, giving up on the whole dangerous plot and returning Gerald's down payment. That would be tricky, of course, because he had already deposited \$25,000 into numerous accounts against which several checks totaling an equal amount had been written and were now in the hands of suppliers, subcontractors and lenders.

His cell phone rang – a call from Tori. "Shit!" Tom shut off the phone, recalling Gerald's instructions to keep the device inoperative. He glanced at his watch. It was now 3:56 p.m.

Ninety minutes earlier, Vicki was sprawled in bed, lips dry, nipples sore, and chest still heaving after an hour of kissing, fondling, tribbing, tonguing, and the commission of other acts of passionate love-making. She turned her head slowly toward Morcilla, smiled, and said, "You better get dressed. Sherwood is supposed to be home from work a little after 3 today. He sees his last patient at 2." Morcilla was lying on her stomach and resting her head on her hands, fingers interlaced. Her large breasts were pressed out to the sides; they looked like two savory loaves of unbaked peasant bread, pale as bleached flour. Vicki sat up and caressed Morcilla's back from her shoulder blades to her sacral promontory and back up again. "C'mon, M. Get up. If Sherwood catches us like this . . . well, I can't imagine what he would say. Or do. Knowing him, he'd first kill himself and then try to kill me."

"OK, Babe. I'm getting up. Give me another minute to stop shivering. I haven't had sex like that in God knows how long. In fact, I haven't had sex period in God knows how long."

"You and Gerald? . . . No?" Vicki shook her head to fake a modicum of pity, and picked up her bra from the floor.

Morcilla said, "I worry about him sometimes; actually, a lot, lately. Who knows where his cock has been. A few weeks back, on the day of my party from hell – you know, the one where my dear friend Chappy had a nervous breakdown. Well, right before the party started Gerald waltzed in with his hair parted on the wrong side, and I thought, 'Oh my God, he's a closet fagela.' Then I felt bad for questioning his sexuality, but I still worry he might be out experimenting." At no time did Morcilla perceive her own Lesbian encounters with Vicki to be equivalent to what she feared were Gerald's moral depredations; to Morcilla, passionate Sapphic love between two long-time dear friends and confidants was in no way comparable to anonymous animal lust between two men eager – driven – to release their reservoirs of backed-up semen. The former was intellectual, advanced, logical; the latter . . . well, it embodied all the characteristics Morcilla despised about men, and inspired her to seek and attain a position of power over them.

Vicki stopped latching her bra and let it fall back on the floor – the conversation had begun to arouse her. "Hmm, maybe what Gerald needs to get back on the straight and narrow is a little – don't laugh – ménage a trois. I know it sounds wild, but what do you think about proposing the idea to him? No Sherwood, of course." Sherwood was Vicki's anal-retentive second husband, a prominent psychiatrist, a Professor at Penn and certified control freak. "You could slip it slyly into an innocuous conversation, y'know. Say, 'I wonder if Vicki would be into a three-way.' I've have feeling he would go for it."

Morcilla sat up abruptly and stared sternly at Vicki for a moment to let the gravity of her soon-to-be announced rejection set in, and as she did this, her pendulous tits swayed seductively. "Are you crazy? I can't do that – I don't want to do that. These times we have together

are our own special thing, Vicki. They belong to you and me, only. Don't ever mention it to anyone, ever. Not even a word about it in the confessional. I don't want some priest with a secret recording device jerking off to a detailed recitation of your sins."

"I'm sorry, M."

Morcilla lay back flat on the bed. She exhaled a stream of air upwards across her face fluttering her bangs. "Me too, Vick. You're a beautiful woman – and a marvelous friend. Let's leave it at that." Morcilla untangled her blouse and added, "By the way, there isn't a man alive who wouldn't go for a ménage a trois if his wife granted him permission – it doesn't resolve anything. After one three-way, pretty soon he's dragging you to the grocery store to help him pick out the next skinny skank. Depressing."

Vicki hooked the clasps on her bra and began hunting for the rest of her clothing. Morcilla did likewise. Vicki replied, "I've seen those girls in the store – I never knew they hung around waiting to get picked up by horny couples. I guess I've read too much Louisa May Alcott and not enough Germaine Greer."

Morcilla laughed. "My mother bought a copy of *The Female Eunuch* when it first came out and she hid it from my father who would have banned it from all our houses if he had known about it. Of course, my mother didn't tell me about all the controversy surrounding the book until later. By then she owned a veritable collection of contemporary literary smut: *The Happy Hooker*, *Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex*, *The Story of O*, *Valley of the Dolls*."

Vicki exclaimed, "*Valley of the Dolls* – I remember seeing that movie. There's an actress in it with boobs almost as big and beautiful as yours, M."

"Thank you, but you're thinking of *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. I

had to sit through that hideous mess back at CMU at the urging of the randy Gerald Pfalzgraf – Mr. Underground Cinema.”

After a minute of silence, Vicki asked Morcilla in a rather off-hand manner, “Have you thought about splitting up with Gerald? Temporarily maybe? I know you’ve been with each other for a long time but it sounds like he may have entered that netherworld where males find it impossible not to screw anyone – girl or boy – half their age. Have you contemplated it?”

Almost fully dressed, Morcilla responded, “Well, certainly, Vicki. But to what end? After twenty years of marriage you expect a certain level of friction, but I would not be the one to initiate a divorce, and I doubt Gerald would be either. The pre-nup awards him a small bit of compensation – certainly not enough to prop up his firm the way he runs it. Most of the money I’ve made in real estate and other investments over the past twenty years is exempt; a lot of capital is fenced off from Gerald in trust funds and offshore accounts in the Caymans. He can’t get to it unless I die before him.” Morcilla pulled on her skirt and signaled to Vicki to zip up the back.

She continued, “I’ll never divorce Gerald. If he gets on my nerves too much, I’ll just squeeze his company. And if he really wants out . . . well, I’ll make sure he leaves with his dick in his hand. He can litigate, I suppose, but my lawyers will smother him with ‘orders to show cause,’ or ‘causes to show orders,’ or whatever torture they dreamed up in law school. You know, to tell you the truth, although Gerald has been acting strange lately, I’m not going to rewrite my will. If Gerald ever needed a reason to get rid of me it would be the discovery that I cut him out of my will.” Morcilla laughed, “Over the years he’s learned how to be a cultured city-boy, but deep down he still has the mentality of a hillbilly. He’d tear out the lungs of anyone who dared to steal some of his raccoon meat.”

“Oh, Morcilla – the way you talk sometimes. I’m very sure Gerald loves you. And so if his behavior lately has been a bit strange, then chalk it up to a midlife crisis. He’ll come back to you soon – kissing your feet and burying his face in the declivity of your . . .”

“Him and his fucking Machiavelli.”

“What?”

Sherwood called from the front door, “Afternoon, honey! Is that Morcilla’s sexy yellow Ferrari I see in the driveway?”

Tom checked his watch again for the twentieth time in the past five minutes. It was now 4 p.m. and very shortly, assuming Gerald’s time-table was correct, the yellow Ferrari would come into sight from the west. For his first shot, he picked out a truck heading east emblazoned with “Sam’s Club” on the side. Tom put a round into the back quarter of the trailer. The driver never applied the brakes or downshifted or reacted in any observable way. A truck pulling a trailer full of Acura’s, also heading east came into Tom’s view. “Fucking Nips,” Tom said to himself as he pierced a hole through the passenger-side door of the pretty silver car on the end, its hood, quarter panels, and doors protected from stone dings by a white vinyl skin. The truck driver rolled on as if nothing happened. Tom checked his watch. He prepared for the arrival of a bright yellow Ferrari heading eastbound with the top down, no doubt in the passing lane and kicking ass. He figured he would take one more shot at a vehicle heading west, just to mix it up. A dump truck bearing the logo of a rival paving company was traveling at the speed limit in the right lane. Tom took aim at the dumper. He squeezed the trigger, failing to notice a late model SUV beginning a passing maneuver. Tom nailed the windshield of the SUV and the vehicle started to fishtail wildly before rolling over several times. For a brief moment Tom’s face bore a remarkable resemblance to Gustave

Courbet's *The Desperate Man*. Tom shouted, "Jesus fucking Christ! You fucking asshole!" Just then the Ferrari, its convertible top retracted, appeared around a bend. Gerald was right – there was no mistaking this car. Tom took a deep breath and held it. He looked around like all criminals do before they commit their dastardly deeds, peered through the scope and concentrated with all his fortitude. In profile, the driver appeared feminine – Tom had assumed all along that Gerald's nemesis was a man – but at this juncture, having already taken a number of shots, Tom committed to completing the mission.

The driver of the Ferrari slowed down to about twenty miles per hour in response to seeing the SUV on the other side flip over repeatedly. Now the shot would be a piece of cake. Tom squeezed the trigger and split the driver's cranium just above the right ear, leaving an exit wound the size of a doorknob. The Ferrari swerved unceremoniously into the median and settled at the bottom of a drainage ditch, stalling out like a cheap lawnmower.

Drivers of cars and trucks on both lanes of the interstate were stopping en masse. Some got out of their vehicles to inspect the pandemonium but none yet knew or suspected its cause. It appeared to all that the driver of an SUV lost control of the vehicle – probably from talking on a cell phone or texting with a friend. Tom packed up his gear and ran back to his truck parked behind a stand of pines along the unmapped access road. He bolted as calmly as he could under the circumstances, and snaked a long dirt road back to Route 604. Within fifteen minutes he was back at the job site, just in time to overhear a foreman announce the basics of a report he picked up on the scanner about a major pile up down the road.

New Jersey State Police vehicles sped by the job site at a hundred miles per hour, followed by ambulances and news vans with preposterous dishes and antennae trussed up on their roofs. A helicopter

passed overhead. One of Tom's workers declared, "I bet it was a fuckin' sniper shooting at cars, like them niggers in DC." Tom thought for a moment, considering whether he should shut down the site for the time being. But if he did people might wonder what had motivated him to do so. Would they question his prescience about the presence of a sniper? Instead he instructed, "Calm down, calm down. There's no sniper. And stop saying the N-word. Do you want us to get cited by the EEOC, for Chrissakes? Someone probably just crossed the middle line, bullshitting on a cell phone or something."

For the next seven hours, as the police made measurements and tow-trucks removed the broken vehicles, denizens of I80 experienced one of the worst backups since the highway through Jersey was completed in 1973. At a rest stop, the police identified two trucks that had the telltale bullet holes of a shooter who had likely taken his shots around the time of the two fatalities. A law enforcement spokesperson went on the Six O'clock news to announce the initial supposition that a "crazed sniper" was responsible for the carnage, and the State Police were establishing a taskforce to protect against any possible future assaults. Just like Gerald said they would. Tom ordered the job site shut down and went home to his crappy apartment in Jersey.

Tori called Tom around 6:15. "Holey Moley, Tom, did you see the news? A sniper at Allamuchy? Weren't you working right near there?"

"Yeah, baby, I saw . . . I heard about it and believe me, the chaos was something I've never seen before. I heard a couple of people were killed, and a couple of trucks were shot at too. But I'm OK. Don't worry about me."

Tori blurted, "Tom, I'm scared. Some guy from the FBI called me today. I was too afraid to answer. He left a message about confiscating the house and our car. What am I going to do? Can't you come back here and help me?"

“Yeah, soon. Listen, baby, I’m working with an old friend. He’s got connections and we’re gonna squash this whole inquiry. You’ll be free and clear in no time. These guys calling you – they’re pretending to be from the FBI. They’re just a bunch a fuckin’ repo men.”

“Are you sure? They say they’re gonna throw me out of the house and take away Go-Go.” Go-Go was Tori’s Welsh Corgi, a tiny dog for which she paid \$950 and that Tom ridiculed as having rodents in its pedigree. Tom harbored ill-will toward Go-Go starting the very first day Tori brought him home when the creature slipped into the garage and chewed through the rubber hoses and power cord of Tom’s brand new compressor.

“No, Victoria – they’re not gonna throw you out. And they’re not gonna take away Go-Nad. Why would they want that rat anyway?” When Tori failed to respond as Tom hoped with a little chuckle, he said, “I’m sorry. Just don’t talk to any of those people, and definitely don’t let anyone in the house. Make them get a search warrant first”

“OK, Tom. I won’t. Who is this friend of you’ns.” Tori used a plural of “you” peculiar to southwest Pennsylvania and elsewhere in Appalachia. “Does he live in Donora? Did you meet him in the Army?” Tom didn’t like the way the conversation had begun to resemble a game of Twenty Questions.

“Just you never mind. Things are gonna get better from now on. That’s all I can tell you now,” said Tom who now wished he hadn’t mentioned any of this to his dimwit wife.

The meeting was significantly off-topic. Having spent the bulk of the day discussing museum construction costs, property tax implications and payment structures, Arbogast and one of his analysts were now engaged in a wonky conversation about capitalization of art collections.

“David, the FASB gives a nonprofit collecting organization the option of capitalizing its collection.” The frail-looking analyst continued, “But if you don’t, you’ll have to certify that your collection is only for public exhibition or research or something educational, that you’re preserving and protecting it, which is easy to show, and if you sell anything from the collection, you have to use the money to acquire other works.”

Just as Arbogast was preparing to dive even deeper into FASB rules, and Gerald was shifting his weight off his left cheek and back to the right for the hundredth time, Arbogast’s secretary knocked and entered to report that a shooting had occurred along the I80 corridor in New Jersey. A sniper shooting. A couple of people were killed, according to CNN.

The whole room erupted into multiple reactions of clipped phrases.

Staff guy to Gerald: “Didn’t you just drive through there yesterday?”

Martina: “Oh my God. Gerald, does the limo have bulletproof glass?”

Frail-looking analyst: “Sounds like the DC Beltway Sniper all over again.”

Arbogast: "Gerald, if you want, I'll have my pilot take you back to Manhattan after the quarry visit tomorrow. You too, Ms. Riehl, of course."

Gerald feigned shock at a level equal to the others, even though he already knew about it, having surreptitiously checked his Blackberry right after 4. That more than one person had been shot and killed disturbed him, but of primary interest was whether Morcilla was one of the victims.

"Thank you, David, but I'm sure the Jersey State Police will put a full-court press on this situation. Let's not panic."

"You know, Mr. Pfalzgraf," said the analyst, "these random shooters have warped minds. They think they're still in Vietnam or Cambodia, and that the Charlie is continuously lurking around them. I wouldn't be surprised if this guy in New Jersey tries it again and again until he's caught. Please be vigilant on your way home."

Gerald wondered why did so many people – so many movie plots – turned to Vietnam vets as the cauldron of psychopaths? He asked the analyst, "What makes you think this sniper served in Vietnam?"

"Well, it most certainly seems he's a military man. Someone with that kind of shooting skill has to be. Maybe an Army SDM. Could be younger I suppose, Gulf War, Afghanistan."

Gerald froze for a second, recalling Tom's credentials. He asked, knowing full well the answer, "What's an SDM?"

"Squad designated marksman. I knew a few when I was in the Army. Very capable, but the pressure can be high."

Gerald was surprised to learn that the small man was Army material. Gerald sized up the financial analyst's age. Could it be possible this murinoid man knows Tom Stull? Nah, not in a million years.

"This FASB rule has me a bit concerned, Jacob," Arbogast broke

in as he reengaged his financial analyst on the arcane capitalization shit. Gerald shifted his weight to the right cheek.

It was late and Gerald was dreading the long, uphill hike the next morning from the parking lot up to the edge of the stone quarry. His head would be pounding and his legs would be rubbery from the strain and consequential accumulation of lactic acid in his quadriceps and gastrocnemius muscles. Without Wren around to comfort him Gerald felt his age – more than his age, actually. He had eaten way too much food at dinner, but what choice did he have? Arbogast's personal chef had prepared a meal of Viennese cuisine in his honor. Arbogast had directed his secretary research Gerald's family heritage; she concluded he was of Austrian descent.

As always, the food was spectacular – chestnut soup with Armagnac prunes; palatschinken with smoked trout, apples, horseradish and creme fraiche; kavalierspitz with root vegetables and potato rösti – but the atomic weight of it all exceeded that of polonium. As for sleep, he would get none. The stress of knowing his plan was underway and that people were killed, and that his trigger-man could get caught or might crack up and turn himself in, kept Gerald up all night. *Was Morcilla dead, or was it some other innocent driver?* He scolded himself for distinguishing Morcilla from the innocent. What evil had she committed besides treating Gerald with disdain and gaining some unsightly weight? And using her vast fortune to toy with him as a dog trainer might use or refuse a milk-bone? *Don't forget she had become noticeably less enthusiastic in the sack, too, and was probably screwing David Arbogast.* No doubt, thought Gerald, she would have soon separated him from financial bliss and forced his silly architecture firm

into receivership; perhaps the next time he would run into Tom Stull would be in Bankruptcy Court. *Or would it be in state Supreme Court as co-conspirators charged with committing capital murder.* Gerald weakened further; he got out of bed and took an explosive, runny shit. The palatschinken had quickly morphed into palatscheißen.

Back in bed, sweating, he tried to shift his thoughts to the more pleasant Wren and her perfect jawline. He shrouded his penis with a sock and tried to coax it into wood, but it was no use. He would be a physical wreck the next day and there was nothing he could do about it. *What was Wren doing at this very moment?*

At this very moment, Wren was receiving a mean and sarcastic goodbye from Sinisa. Against her better judgment, she stopped on her way to work at Sinisa's apartment to return the David Yurman jewelry in a gambit to satisfy his demand for financial help and rid herself of the lingering connection to him. As soon as Sinisa opened the door Wren could tell he was speeding. He was full of nervous energy, eating honey with a spoon straight from the jar. Wren immediately regretted coming to the apartment – Sinisa would certainly interpret it as her way of communicating her desire to return to him.

“Wren! What a surprise. Come in, come in. How lovely you look.”

Wren remained in the hallway. “I only came by to give you back your jewelry. I know you need money – It's worth a lot. I want you to have it.”

“Well, *I* want you to keep it. I don't need it now – I got a new gig that's gonna clear up my problems. Come in here – I want to look at you.”

“I have to go to work.”

“So do I. Just come in for a minute. Want a drink?”

Wren took a few tentative steps into the apartment. She looked

around in disgust at the filthy state of Sinisa's living room and at a grotesque ceramic skull sitting on a chintzy side table. The place had really turned into a shithole since she moved out. "Nothing for me," she called to Sinisa who was making a lot of noise in the kitchen breaking ice-cubes from a tray. "I really can't stay."

Sinisa walked into the living room holding a leather toolbag in one hand and two very tall glasses of vodka, a lime wedge tossed into each, in the other hand. "Just one drink, Wren. Then I have to go."

Wren accepted the drink. She placed the box containing the jewelry on the coffee table. Sinisa clinked his glass with hers. He said energetically, "Luda sam za tobom!" and before Wren could swallow a single sip Sinisa chugged his entire tumbler of booze. He tilted his head back and raised high the near-empty glass to his lips in an attempt to slurp a couple more drops then he placed the glass on the coffee table. He hiked up his trousers which had fallen sloppily around his hips.

Wren said with some hesitation, "So . . . you've solved your financial problems. That's good news, Sinisa."

"Yeah, I met a pompous asshole at the Borgata named Garcia . . . wait, that's not it. I mean, Ger . . . uh, Geraci. Some slick motherfucker named Geraci." For a fraction of a split second Wren thought he was going to say "Gerald," and she threw Sinisa a startled look that he missed completely. Sinisa removed a bottle of vodka from the leather toolbag, refilled his tumbler and went on, "This Geraci asshole's got a big-time client with a problem. I'm gonna help him out of it and it's worth a hundred grand to me." His eyes widened and he flashed a satanic smile.

Wren knew the whole deal was wrong. She replied with some forced enthusiasm, "Wow, that's nice."

"Shit, this Geraci guy was wearing a purple clown costume when I met him. A real stidnica. He talks tough, and he throws money around

but I can tell he's not so tough. Right after I finish the job, I'm gonna put the arm on my new friend." Sinisa chortled, "He's gonna wish he never hired me."

"Well, thanks for the drink. I really have to get going now." Wren mentally crossed her fingers that Sinisa would be a civil human being in the end and let her leave unmolested. Sinisa was a manic character and at this very instant he seemed upbeat.

Sinisa took another long pull from the tumbler, quickly dispatching half the contents of the glass. "Fuck work, Wren. I love you. Stay here with me. I'll take care of you. After tonight, I'll clear my debt. And after that, I'm gonna be rolling in cash. Come back to me – you have to come back to me."

Wren put her drink on the coffee table next to Sinisa's, turned, and without saying a word walked toward the door. Incapable of dealing with rejection of any kind, especially the cocky, self-assured kind that Wren had just displayed, Sinisa grabbed her by the hair and pulled her to the floor. She screamed at the sudden yank.

"You don't turn your back on me, Retard. Never do that!" Sinisa thundered. Wren began to shake visibly. A number of scenarios ran through her head at light speed, all of them ending in some sort of violent act committed against her. Sinisa continued raving. "Sit down! Now listen carefully. I have to go out tonight. I won't be back until late. You stay here and make sure my dinner is ready when I get back, Retard."

"Stop calling me that. You know I don't appreciate it one bit." Wren hesitated, worried that her eyes might well up giving Sinisa too much satisfaction. "If anyone's a retard around here, it's you."

Sinisa turned away from Wren and grinned at his success at irritating her. "Just have my fucking dinner ready, and don't fuck it up." Sinisa picked through the leather toolbag as though he was taking

inventory. He pulled an ice-axe from the bag, its pointy end shiny and cruel, and admired it from a variety of angles.

“You know I have to work tonight, Sinisa. Make your own damn dinner.”

Still holding the ice-axe Sinisa turned to confront Wren over her insolence. “You’ll do what I say, bitch! Sunce ti ne sija iz pizde!” Wren noted with alarm how he unconsciously and repeatedly clenched and unclenched his fist around the handle of the axe. The veins on his neck and temples pulsated under his skin. Trying not to appear shaken Wren relented. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were going to be so busy tonight. I’ll take care of it, don’t worry. Just go back to what you were doing.” Since the day Sinisa punched her – that same day Gerald promised to help her escape this bastard’s wrath – Wren harbored genuine fear for her life; she would say whatever it took to calm down Sinisa. Wren sincerely half-expected him to bury the business end of the ice-axe into her cranium.

Calmer now, he responded, “OK. That’s more like it. When are you coming home from work, Wren?” She didn’t like the way he implied the railroad flat was her home, but when it seemed she was free to go and after he called her “Wren” instead of “retard” or “cunt” or “bitch,” she relaxed a bit. “I have to close the place tonight – probably 4.”

“Well, I should be home before that. Just don’t fuck up my dinner – come home on your break.” Sinisa walked slowly back into the kitchen, holding the ice-axe by its head. A minute later he left the railroad apartment with his toolbag.

Wren started to cry. *What was Gerald doing at this very moment?*

Oscar had never been more nervous in his entire life. More than when Gerald first confronted him a few weeks back in his office over the kiddie porn on his company-issued workstation. Even more than the first time he drugged a pretty freshman in a bar not far from RISD, and then thrust himself upon her in a stall in the men's room while she slurred words of semi-protest. He confronted the reality that within the next several minutes, if he performed properly, he would terminate a man's life. And he might be apprehended. Oscar's anxiety was grounded solely in the fear of getting caught – he harbored no illusion that later on he would be remorseful for killing “Worm.” Gerald had convinced Oscar that the victim-to-be was a worthless piece of shit, someone threatening the health and well-being of the firm.

As he often did under stressful circumstances Oscar began to release noxious farts. He hadn't eaten a single bite since Gerald called him the previous evening to give the final green light to the project. Now he was venting gases generated by the corrosion of his stomach lining and upper GI tract by acids rotting out his gut.

The clock on the wall behind the subway attendant's head indicated 11:10 p.m. Oscar entered the Seventh Avenue subway at 14th Street. He swiped a single pass MetroCard given to him by Gerald, and walked slowly down the stairs. He threw the card in the trash can. Oscar was dressed in junky clothing, also provided by Gerald who had placed a black trash bag containing the homeless-man costume under the desk in Oscar's cubicle. Wearing the ragged pants, shirt and parka, beat-up paratrooper boots and two stocking caps, Oscar looked like

any other broken denizen of the IRT caverns. The clothing stunk of body odor, piss, and vomit. Oscar wondered if Gerald had planned that detail as well, perhaps soiling the clothing himself? He suffered a momentary rush of nausea. Enhancing his authenticity, Oscar wore phony teeth sold online by an outfit called Dr. Bukk. Gerald had picked out the “Eleanor” model, cruelly based on the dental profile of the late Mrs. Roosevelt and consisting of too many overlapping teeth crammed together, each rimmed with a greenish patina simulating a decade’s worth of accumulated plaque.

Oscar was carrying a garbage bag that was supposed to hold a blackmail payment to satisfy the extortionist of Pfalzgraf Associates. Instead the bag contained a few packages of paper napkins. He weaved a path toward the south end of the platform as directed by Gerald. At this point Oscar should expect to encounter a man in cheap blue jeans and a Caterpillar hat milling around behind the stairway leading up to 12th Street. This would be the man code-named “Worm.” Gerald advised Oscar that Worm would be waiting quietly for a payoff from a bagman carrying a black Hefty bag, and would offer no confrontation or resistance whatsoever. The only serious challenge facing Oscar would be the timing of the encounter; he had to be close to his victim precisely when the 1 train barreled into the station. Gerald told Oscar that he had instructed Worm to be standing in an isolated area between the staircase and a tiled brick wall, and next to a pillar on which a broken payphone was affixed. This would place him close to the edge of the tracks, out of sight.

Oscar had ridden the New York City subway hundreds of times in his life, and yet, as he shuffled toward his destination, he noticed for the first time the massive quantity of chewing gum that had been discarded on the floor over the course of decades, each piece now a black oval integrated into the concrete surface. It seemed that nearly a quarter of

exposed concrete was obscured by black ovals. *Could an anthropologist a thousand years from now determine something about the people who occupied this odd subterranean maze by studying the seemingly random oval patterns on the floor?* Oscar allowed his fascination to distract him a bit. He abruptly snapped out of the daydream upon hearing the faint rumble of the train approaching the station from the north. Oscar was a few paces from the rendezvous point when he made eye contact with Worm, the man in the stupid-looking Caterpillar hat, the fucker extorting bribery payments and threatening to bring down Pfalzgraf Associates and along with it all the good and not-so-good employees of the firm. Something about the hat iced it for Oscar; it telegraphed a message he didn't much appreciate: "I'm a heartland motherfucker and you're a shameless New York City pussy – the honest day's work I do makes it possible for you decadent queers to get your toenails done."

When Tom Stull caught sight of Oscar in his homeless-man outfit carrying the trash bag presumably filled with the \$200,000 payoff, he let out a long sigh of relief. The day of sharpshooting along I80 had been extremely stressful, but now he would get the remainder of his huge, well-earned reward. He moved toward the pillar with the broken payphone and faced the tracks. He did this on Gerald's instruction to limit the likelihood of being spotted by others on the platform, although there wasn't another soul around besides Gerald's delivery man. Oscar scratched his balls – the signal to Tom. Tom reciprocated by picking his ass. Oscar sidled next to Tom just as the 1 train sped toward the pair.

Oscar smiled, revealing his crowded Eleanor Roosevelt teeth, and said, "Here's your payoff, Worm-boy." Tom arched his brow at the odd greeting, and as he reached for the trash bag, Oscar shoved him as hard as he could. As Tom tumbled onto the tracks he twisted his body like a cat trying to land on all fours. His head struck the third rail and his

body fell directly in front of the train. The motorman screamed, “Holy Shit!” – an apt reaction. No one heard him as the lead car was empty at this time of night. Tom Stull was bisected before the motorman could even apply the brakes. Within seconds, Oscar was on the staircase climbing three steps at a time. He ran past the subway clerk who was in the land of Nod, and up more steps out onto to 12th Street near Saint Vincent’s Hospital on Seventh Avenue. The corner was particularly dark. Oscar stepped behind a row of hedges and quickly shed the ski caps, soiled pants and smelly parka, revealing the cleaner clothes he wore underneath the disguise. He stuffed the garments into the trash bag on top of the paper napkins and threw the bag into a steel-mesh garbage can on a corner four blocks away. Already sirens were blaring and a number of police and firemen were converging on the subway entrance at 14th Street.

Oscar felt euphoric. He had vanquished the evil extortionist and saved the company. He earned back his good standing with Gerald and dodged that ugly child-porn fiasco. And as a bonus Oscar accomplished his secret life-long desire of actually killing another human being. Since he was ten years old, Oscar often mulled over the methods by which he might kill a neighbor, teacher, co-worker, relative – creating elaborate scenarios for body disposal but always concluding that the risk of capture and punishment was too great. And his aversion to the risk provided a convenient barrier to actually planning and carrying out a murder. Now, by fucking up at work Oscar faced greater risk if he did not carry out a murder, and this turnabout served up an opportunity for which he had waited thirty years.

He hailed a cab on Greenwich. “Take me to Madison Square Park – not the Garden.” As the driver traveled up Eighth Avenue, Oscar took the Dr. Bukk’s out of his mouth and with sadness threw them out the window. He kind of liked the look of imperfection it gave

him, a blunt protest against the mad pursuit of Brite Smile perfection common among too many New Yorkers.

The radio in the cab was tuned to 1010 WINS – “You give us twenty-two minutes, we’ll give you the world” – which reported a breaking news item about an accident on the Seventh Avenue subway line in the Village. Something about a person tumbling onto the tracks in front of an oncoming 1 train. The report was brief and made no mention of an eye-witness account. Oscar quietly passed gas, suddenly very hungry. There was no time, however, to stop for food – Gerald was very adamant that Oscar return to the office immediately after completing his assignment to report on the details. The cab driver glanced at Oscar in the rearview mirror with a look of disgust and rolled his window down.

As the cab proceeded east along 23rd Street, Oscar instructed the driver to leave him at the corner of Twenty-sixth and Madison. Gerald wanted Oscar to walk back to the office through the park, rather than take a taxi right to the front door. The night air was sultry and the skies dark and overcast. They said it was supposed to rain hard tomorrow. Oscar was surprisingly serene for a man who had moments earlier committed first degree murder. The whole episode had happened so quickly and cleanly; he hadn’t had to study his victim’s shocked face nor at the gruesome bisection of Worm that followed his tumble onto the tracks. Oscar strolled through the park with a bounce in his step, admiring the Flatiron Building in the distance and looking forward to rehabilitating his career at Pfalzgraf Associates, and moving on with his life.

As Oscar strolled happily through Madison Square Park admiring the Flatiron Building, Sinisa sat in the dark by the window on the newly installed carpet of the unfinished seventeenth floor, one level below the offices of Pfalzgraf Associates, smoking another cigarette and likewise admiring the illuminated landmark.

Sinisa was born near Titovo Užice when Serbia was still part of Yugoslavia, and lived there until he was twelve years-old, leaving behind his birthplace (but not his demons) for a new home in the Bronx. He and his much-older cousin moved to Co-op City, and Sinisa went to schools integrated into the complex. Starting in his early teens he came into Manhattan regularly to drink and chase gash at the Mudd Club, Danceteria and Area. He took jobs delivering produce, washing dishes, bartending, bouncing. After his cousin's mother hit the New York State lottery and bestowed some of the proceeds on her nephew, Sinisa moved to Chelsea. And in all those years, characteristic of so many native and near-native New Yorkers, Sinisa had never before taken notice of historic landmarks like the Flatiron Building.

A cigarette dangled from Sinisa's mouth as he thumbed a stack of \$100 bills bound by a red ribbon imprinted with the logo of the Borgata Hotel in Atlantic City, one of several stashed in a bag just as Geraci said. Sinisa also studied the packet of white powder that was sitting atop the money – presumably the gift from South America Geraci referred to. He opened the packet, scooped a small amount using the long fingernail on his pinky finger and snorted it up into his right nostril. "Goddamn! Gle kurtsa ti u slamnatome sheshiru! That's

good shit.” He scooped another portion and snorted it into his left nostril. “That’s gonna make things easier.”

Just before midnight Sinisa stood up and walked toward the newly-opened stairwell connecting the seventeenth floor to the eighteenth. Gerald had recently closed on a fifty-year lease for the entire seventeenth floor which his company would soon occupy along with the eighteenth. Contractors had just begun to reconfigure the space; they had not yet installed a badge reader on the seventeenth floor so Sinisa was able to ascend to the eighteenth floor without leaving an electronic trace in the security system’s database.

Oscar entered the building and rode the elevator to the eighteenth floor, swiped his badge through the reader and proceeded to his work area. Design drawings and photographs of buildings on which he worked as lead architect were pinned to the walls of his cubicle, and he admired them proudly as he sat in his Herman Miller Aeron chair waiting for Gerald to arrive and exonerate him from all his past sins. Sinisa sat in an identical chair in the cubicle behind Oscar’s, the leather toolbag at his feet and a black ski-mask covering his face. Each of his fingertips was covered with a Band-Aid, and he wore thick, latex gloves. He gave Oscar a few minutes to get settled. Oscar was mumbling and humming nervously to himself when Sinisa came around the corner and announced loudly, “Stand up motherfucker and turn around! Don’t look at me!”

Oscar nearly shit his pants at the sudden appearance of the masked man, letting out a smelly fart instead. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“Shut up asshole. Stand up and turn around right fucking now.” Oscar, now visibly trembling, complied. Sinisa pulled a straight-jacket out of his toolbag and unfolded it. He tossed it on the desk so Oscar could see it. “Put this jacket on,” Sinisa commanded.

Oscar quickly picked it up and started to put it on like a normal jacket. "Not like that, govno yedno. Turn it around so the back faces forward." Oscar fumbled with the straight-jacket, dropping it on the floor. It took a couple of tries before he donned it properly. "Cross your arms."

Sinisa grabbed the ends of the long sleeves and buckled them together behind Oscar's back. Oscar started to say something but Sinisa screamed in his ear, "Lie down on the floor and face the wall!"

With his arms disabled, Oscar dropped to his knees and fell on his face. He started to whimper. In the initial moments of the attack Oscar was totally confused, struggling to understand why this crazy man was here in the office. Oscar thought he had been mistaken for someone else. It took another several seconds subdued on the floor before the idea entered his head that Gerald might have arranged the invasion. His mind was racing, *Good God, Gerald's going to have me killed. That fucking bastard!* Out loud he yelled. "That fucking bastard! That *fucking* bastard!"

"Shut the fuck up, pervert! Poserem ti se u usta pa ti petom nabiyem!"

Called a "pervert" by this thug, Oscar was now certain that Gerald was behind the attack. Now Oscar understood clearly that he had painted himself into a corner. He had been a patsy. Oscar had done Gerald's dirty work for him, killing Worm, and now in return for performing this risky and heroic deed he would die most cruelly. He farted loudly. Sinisa snarled at Oscar with disgust in his voice, "Prekid prdenje! Te preneraženost mene."

From the tool bag Sinisa removed a rope with a crudely formed noose on one end. In one swift movement Sinisa slipped the noose over Oscar's head and around his throat. Oscar let out a scream, and started to writhe on the floor, but the straight-jacket limited his

movement. Sinisa straddled Oscar's legs and pulled the noose tight, stifling the screams and producing ugly, bulging veins on Oscar's neck and temples. Oscar's jerky movements reminded Sinisa of the marlin he caught during a fishing expedition in the Gulf of Mexico, thrashing wildly after being hauled onto the deck of the sailing vessel hired by one of Sinisa's crime associates. Sinisa tried not to inflict any bruises on Oscar's body, or to allow him to suffer any defensive wounds that might intrigue a detective. The straight-jacket prevented Oscar from scratching at Sinisa's skin and collecting telltale DNA under his fingernails.

After two minutes Oscar ceased thrashing and his body became limp. His pants were soaked in urine. He bore an uncanny resemblance to the dead body portrayed in the lower left corner of Géricault's greater-than-life masterpiece *The Raft of the Medusa*. Sinisa righted Oscar's body into a sitting position and removed the straight-jacket. He placed a tarp on the desk and set the lifeless body upon it. From fear and the fight to stay alive, Oscar reeked of piss and nervous sweat. Sinisa lashed the other end of the rope to an exposed beam above the cubicle and dropped the body a few feet to induce neck trauma. He then positioned the body such that it hung like an authentic suicide. Drops of urine began to run down Oscar's leg and onto the carpet. Perfect, thought Sinisa as he tipped over Oscar's ergonomic chair.

Sinisa stashed all his equipment into the toolbox, along with the money and cocaine, and left the scene the way had come in. Still wearing the ski mask, he descended the stairs to the ground floor and exited into a back alley where he blended seamlessly into the inky darkness of the evening.

For a man who had just summarily executed a complete stranger, Sinisa was surprisingly collected. After leaving Pfalzgraf Associates' offices Sinisa stopped at a dingy Irish bar – Maggie's? Langan's? Mahoney's? They're all the same. He quickly put back five double shots of Jameson. Around 2 a.m., he stumbled out of a cab and walked slowly to the door of his apartment, finding it difficult to get his key into the lock. He pounded on the door like the poor bastard who got walled up in *The Cask of Amontillado*. A large muscular man opened the door; his slightly shorter, similarly built male companion stood behind him. Sinisa was not easily intimidated but in his inebriated condition, facing two body-builders each towering over him, Sinisa felt threatened. He had seen these two Chelsea Boys many times digging in the sad, little flower garden in front of the apartment building, and when they returned from Crunch, dripping with sweat.

“Uh, uh, sorry to bother you. I must be on the wrong floor.”

The Chelsea Boys stared at the stinking Sinisa, and then looked at each other. Neither said a word. The bigger of the two simply closed the door quietly in his face.

“Fucking queers.” Sinisa climbed a flight of stairs in the six-floor walkup, and slowly ambled to the correct apartment this time. When the lock submitted to the key Sinisa smiled with relief because just a moment earlier he was still not a hundred percent certain he was in the right location. He tossed his keys into the ceramic skull by the door, a tsochke taken from a recalcitrant gambler. The smell of burnt food emanated from the retrograde oven.

“What the fuck stinks? Wren! Get your goddamn ass out here!” As thin wisps of smoke wafted from the oven, Sinisa angrily clenched his jaw and spat out, “Fucking retard!”

Six hours earlier, after Sinisa left with his leather toolbag, Wren set the oven to 250 degrees and slid in a Swanson’s Salisbury steak dinner. She hung around until she was sure Sinisa wasn’t lurking around to test her fealty. She was angry at herself for having gone to Sinisa’s apartment in the first place – just to return a couple pieces of jewelry. Because it was impossible to get from Public Hair to Sinisa’s flat and back again during her break to prepare the meal in accordance with the directions on the package, she set the oven temperature lower to compensate for the increased time the TV dinner would occupy the oven. However, even at 250 degrees the meal was burnt beyond recognition.

Rather than becoming extremely angry over the state of his dinner, Sinisa, exhausted, shuffled to the sofa, turned on the TV and gazed lovingly at the beautifully-tied stacks of cash in the bag. “Halfway there,” he said to himself, smiling broadly as he anticipated receiving the rest of his \$100,000 payment, clearing things with his boss, and initiating an extortion scheme on the clownish Geraci. Sinisa tapped out the rest of the cocaine from the gift packet onto a mirror on the coffee table. He put a steel straw to his nose and bent down low over the mirror, quickly snorting the coke-plus deep into his nasal passages. He wiped the mirror clean with his forefinger, leaving not a trace, and rubbed the remaining powder along his gums. He sat back hard into the sofa, wincing from a muscle pain in his back. *Probably pulled a muscle hoisting that pervert’s dead weight onto the desk.* Sinisa flipped through channels quickly, stopping momentarily when he glimpsed what appeared to be a scene from a familiar movie. He passed over reruns of *Green Acres*, *Cheers* and *Taxi*, four shopping networks and

an even greater number of religious channels and their screaming holy men, settling at last on *Death Wish*, just as Charles Bronson does his best Bernard Goetz impersonation. Or was it the other way around? At the first commercial Sinisa got up to shut off the oven and retrieve the mystery food that awaited him. Suffering from a sudden, uncomfortable tightness in his chest he sat back down. He started to cough, and continued coughing uncontrollably until he vomited all over the coffee table. The sprayed contents of his stomach – Jameson mixed with chewed-up bar peanuts and a pickled egg – defiled the mirror, some magazines, an ashtray full of butts, the David Yurman jewelry box, and the two tumblers of vodka, one empty, the other full.

Sinisa could not remember a recent time when he felt as shitty as he did at this moment. He had trouble breathing and he felt flush with fever. “Loše se ose am,” he mumbled. He tried to convince himself that he was just getting older, and couldn’t handle so much whisky, cocaine and murder in such a brief stretch of time, but it wasn’t working. No, his health was deteriorating rapidly and he needed to do something about it fast. Sinisa decided to take a cab to the hospital. He walked out into the hallway, gasping for breath and debating whether to go back into the apartment and call 911. He decided it would be quicker overall to hail a cab than to wait for an ambulance to arrive, so he headed for the stairs. Sinisa was sweating profusely now and as he glanced into a gaudy hallway mirror he noticed bluishness around his mouth and nose. From the intense coughing and sweat pouring off his forehead into his eyes, Sinisa could not see clearly. He opened the heavy fire door leading into the stairwell and executed a poorly positioned step. He pitched forward, rolling, banking, and crashing down the entire flight, ending the fall by slamming the top of his head into the old-fashioned accordion-shaped radiator, compressing his neck

like a stoved finger. The wedge-shaped fold of the accordion split open Sinisa's head.

Now, it may be possible for a man to survive tumbling down a flight of stairs, or profuse bleeding from a deep laceration, or slamming his head into an immovable mass of cast-iron, or inhaling poisonous ricin; but to suffer the combination of all four proved for Sinisa to be thoroughly and undeniably lethal. As Machiavelli noted, *if an injury has to be done to a man it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared.*

The horrid noise of the cranium-radiator collision roused the Chelsea Boys. They waited a minute before calling 911 to gaze upon the crumpled, bleeding body. Both men maintained some distance from Sinisa out of concern their neighbor might be HIV-positive; quite often rabid homophobes like Sinisa led secret nocturnal lives cavorting in the deepest, darkest underground gay bars in Chelsea soliciting crazy sex, handkerchiefs of varying colors hanging from their back pockets. Why couldn't these Queens just accept reality and dispense with the intolerance meted out during the day?

The police arrived, followed by EMTs in a flashy ambulance. Inexplicably a fire truck arrived and stayed briefly. A detective surveyed the scene, made some notes, had some photographs taken of Sinisa's apartment and the stairwell. He conducted a brief interview with the Chelsea Boys. The EMTs wheeled out Sinisa's sheet-covered body as half the building's residents gawked. A video recording appeared on YouTube the next day.

Just as the EMTs collapsed the legs of the gurney for insertion into the back of the ambulance, Wren passed by the apartment in a cab on her way home from her late evening shift at Public Hair serving drinks and conversation to those denizens of the Flatiron neighborhood – hairdressers, dog-walkers, estheticians, artists, writers, students,

waiters –who didn't have to be anywhere or do anything the next day until way past noon. She had instructed the cabbie to drive by Sinisa's building hoping to see him standing on the stoop or the sidewalk, for if he was she could go home confident that he wasn't waiting for her in the bushes or worse, inside her bedroom.

When Wren saw the mass of vehicles, lights pulsating, in front of Sinisa's building, the first thought to form in her head was that he had beaten someone to death, and her legs went wobbly. She envisioned a corpse with an ice-axe protruding from some part of it. Sinisa's anger over the inedible dinner must have compounded into a full-fledged wrath against some undeserving victim – a delinquent debtor, a snippy neighbor, an irritating colleague. She called to the driver to pull over. Wren stepped out of the cab and started to walk into the crowd, failing to pay the fare. The cab driver tried to get Wren's attention but she was too stunned to respond. He jumped from the cab and followed her, weaving through the onlookers and yelling in a heavy accent, "Hey, lady! Stop! Pay me now, fooking lady!" A police officer on the scene grabbed the driver by the arm.

"What's the problem? Why all the commotion?"

"Stop that fooking lady! She not pay me. Owe me eight fooking dollar." The driver bounced on the balls of his feet and pointed at Wren with his arm extended like an agitated three-year-old. She was far ahead of him working her way toward the ambulance.

"Calm down and stop cursing." The officer instructed the driver to stand still. He then walked over to Wren who was staring blankly at the gurney in the ambulance. The officer asked her some questions, but she didn't seem to hear him. Another cop walked up to assist, and then another. She seemed catatonic. One of the EMTs hopped out of the ambulance and began to examine her. The scene of a visibly-shaken Wren sitting on the curb surrounded by police officers and

medical personnel captured the attention of the Chelsea Boys who from the top steps near the entrance of the building had been watching events unfold. They did not know Wren well, not even her name, but they recalled she once lived upstairs with the recently-departed Sinisa. The two muscular men relayed this information to the officers.

“Ma’am, what’s your name? Are you related to Mr. Ražnatovi?” The officers on duty were well-acquainted with Sinisa. For many years his antics were the cause of numerous calls to the Tenth Precinct. Fights in bars, drunken harassment, public drug use, petty theft – all perpetrated by Sinisa who always seemed to escape serious punishment by the justice system. Once, right after moving to Manhattan from Co-op City, Sinisa got into a bar fight with an off-duty cop and managed to take his gun away from him. The incident earned Sinisa a brief jail sentence, but more importantly it earned him the eternal disdain of the officers of the Tenth who witnessed one of their brothers take a serious disciplinary beating from Internal Affairs.

“Where is he? Did he kill someone?” replied Wren in a raspy voice, then through lurching sobs, she exclaimed, “Did you arrest him? Where is he? I’m frightened!”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Sinisa. Did you arrest him yet?”

“Ma’am, Sinisa’s dead. That’s his body in the ambulance. He fell down the stairs about two hours ago.”

Wren abruptly stopped crying and stared dumbfounded at the officer. She looked up one at a time at the people encircling her – the EMTs, the Chelsea Boys, the cab driver – like Dorothy upon awakening from her tornado-induced dream. Wren stood up slowly, brushed off the seat of her skinny black pants, reached into her purse, handed a \$20 bill to the cab driver, thanked the officers and EMTs and mind-

lessly walked toward the apartment building, the pained expression on her face slowly transforming into one of relief and joy.

“Ma’am,” called the officer, “you can’t go back to your apartment tonight. The detectives are still investigating the crime scene. Do you have another place to stay?”

“Oh, I don’t live here. I just need to get something.” She wanted that David Yurman bracelet and necklace back. Now that Sinisa was dead, Wren no longer considered the elegant jewelry a lever to be pulled by her evil ex-boyfriend, but as compensation for putting up with the bastard’s torture and abuse.

“You can’t go in there, ma’am.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a crime scene.” Wren looked directly at the officer as if seeking knowledge from a mountaintop guru. She appeared confused. “It’s just procedure, Ma’am – even though the subject accidentally fell down the stairs we still have to check for evidence of foul play.”

“OK. Is it alright if I go home now?” Wren’s response was child-like and non-confrontational. She sounded like a little girl who had been told that her uncle’s portfolio of convertible debentures and zero-coupon bonds had lost half its value. The situation sounded serious but what did it mean to her? Nothing. Foul play? How was it relevant to her? It wasn’t.

Wren walked the couple dozen blocks from Sinisa’s flat to her apartment in Clinton, humming a tune she heard earlier over the sound system at Public Hair: “Fuck the Pain Away” by Peaches. “Suckin’ on my titties like you wanted me; Callin’ me, all the time like blondie; Check out my chrissy behind.” Once home Wren stripped naked, climbed into bed, crammed a pillow between her legs and rubbed her clit to the fantasy of grinding her chrissy behind on Gerald’s cock. Within minutes she shivered with ecstasy and for the next eight hours slept like a rock.

The quarry master's fingers resembled bratwursts, fat and stubby from having been pinched between slabs of stone countless times over his forty years in the business. Three of the man's fingernails were black from recent blunt trauma. He had just started to exhibit to his visitors several samples of limestone of varying shades and grains when Gerald's Blackberry rang. He stepped aside and put a normal, human-shaped finger into his left ear to muffle the noise of the hydraulic hammers in the background. Gerald was looking haggard from the malaise induced the previous night by rich foods, stiff spirits and sleep deprivation. He tried extremely hard to appear composed as he answered the call, knowing the message would be a shocker.

"Gerald? Gerald? Oh, Gerald." It was his secretary Claudia calling from the office. "The police are here. They're here right now."

"Claudia, what's going on there?" he asked loudly enough so the others would hear his concerned entreaty to the caller.

"I was the first one to come into the office this morning, and I found . . . I saw . . . Oscar's dead, Gerald!" Gerald turned to face Martina and Arbogast with his best stunned look. Claudia continued, "He hung himself right at his desk. I found him hanging next to his desk. It was awful. The police are here now. They want to talk to you." Gerald could hear the volume of her sobbing diminish, then a new voice.

"Mr. Pfalzgraf? I'm Detective Dunn with the NYPD. How are you this morning, sir?"

How am I? My secretary is sobbing, for Christ sake. “What’s going on there, Detective?”

“I’m sorry to report to you that one of your employees, uh, an Oscar Dumphy . . .”

“Dupree.”

“Right, Oscar Dupree. He committed suicide last night, probably around midnight. That’s just a bit after the time he swiped his ID card to get into the office. Hung himself right next to his desk. We didn’t find a note or any other kind of communication. We’re having trouble identifying a next of kin.”

“I, uh, I’m shocked. I don’t know what to say. Next of kin? I don’t know who that would be. I’d have to check his personnel file. He wasn’t married and had no children as far as I know.”

Dunn continued, “Do you know of a reason why he might have done this? Did he seem depressed or desperate or anything?”

Like a Texas Hold ‘em player in one of those weekly world series tournaments who has the lock hand after the flop, Gerald tried not to appear anxious to reveal information too quickly. “Well . . . I . . .” he dragged it out as far as he deemed appropriate. “He was having some problems at work, which I’d rather discuss with you in person. It’s not something I want to speak about over a cell phone.”

“Whatever you say, sir. When will you be back in town?”

“As soon as I can. I’ll start driving back right away. That should get me to Manhattan by late-afternoon. God, why would he do such a thing?”

“Your secretary told me you’re in Western Pee-Ay. Please be advised that traffic through New Jersey on I80 and adjacent highways will probably be slow as the Staties there continue their hunt for that sniper. Killed two and shot up a bunch of trucks. I assume you heard about that Mr. Pfalzgraf.”

The way he asked the question threw Gerald off balance. *Why did he assume I heard about it? . . . Of course I heard about it . . . it's all over the news.*

"Of course I heard about it, Detective. It's all over the news."

"Yes, well, just plan accordingly. We'll be here when you arrive. Drive safely."

"Thank you, Detective."

Martina was the first to speak. "What's the matter Gerald? Is something wrong?"

Gerald repeated what he had heard from the detective – that Oscar hung himself in the office, and that's all anyone knows for now. All around, the Arbogast party shook their heads, and spoke of how sorry they were to hear about this tragedy. "Tragedy" was kicked around a lot, as well as variations on the rhetorical question, "Why would he do such a thing?" Just as Martina was telling the quarry master, "I've known him for two years; I can't grasp why he would do such a thing," Gerald's Blackberry rang again. This had to be the call he had been waiting for, for better or worse. The voice on the other end sounded like law enforcement.

"Mr. Pfalzgraf? Mr. Gerald L. Pfalzgraf, Fifth Avenue, New York City?"

"Yes. That's me. Who is this? What do you want?" Gerald's mouth cottoned up, as it once did as a teenager when he used to smoke marijuana after school from a very efficient bong he bought at head shop in Youngstown, Ohio. Gerald was seriously expecting to be told he was under arrest, but then figured the police would do that in person with appropriate drama.

"My name is Lieutenant Colonel Maria Esposito of the New Jersey State Police. Are you the husband of Morcilla Calatrava Pfalzgraf, also of Fifth Avenue in New York?" Gerald hadn't heard someone use

Morcilla's maiden name for many years, and the sophisticated sound of it catapulted him back to his college years when Morcilla Calatrava was a rich, saucy freshman who drove around campus in her low-slung Lotus Esprit.

"Yes, what . . . "

"I regret to inform you, sir, that your wife was killed in a shooting yesterday afternoon on Interstate 80 in the county of Warren. That's in New Jersey. I'm sorry it took so long to communicate this tragic news to you. We've been overwhelmed by the sniper shooting, and we had some difficulty locating you immediately. Please forgive . . ."

"She was killed . . . by a sniper?" Gerald sounded like a wounded puppy; he started to tear up. His emotional state was driven by a combination of suddenly reflecting on the many years that had elapsed since those simpler days on the Carnegie Mellon campus and some unexpected genuine sorrow for the death of his wife – mostly the former.

"I'm sorry sir. You haven't heard? Yes, a crazed sniper appears to be behind a series of shootings on the interstate. Two people were killed; one was your wife. I'm so sorry. Please be assured that the New Jersey State Police will do everything in our power to bring this criminal to justice."

Gerald simply dropped the Blackberry into the gravel and rubbed his forehead, bumping the quirky-shaped sunglasses off his face and onto the ground as well. What is it about architects and their penchant for oddball eyewear? Arbogast, Martina and the other staff members walked over to him. Before anyone could say a word or make a gesture of inquiry, Gerald announced softly, "Morcilla was one of the people killed by that sniper yesterday. I have to get back to Manhattan right away." Now he was sobbing quite vigorously, and yet he couldn't quite understand why. The last time he remembered crying was – well,

he couldn't remember. Perhaps he was way overdue for a good cry, regardless of the circumstances.

Arbogast insisted that Gerald fly back to Manhattan in his private Citation. The entire buzz around him was about the horrible confluence of his wife's senseless random murder and the suicide of one of his employees. No one made an observation that this was too strange to be a coincidence – that the two awful events might somehow be inter-related. No suspicious talk that Gerald Pfalzgraf was a common factor and a person of interest.

The pilot flew above the I80 corridor, and at the relatively low altitude Gerald was oddly fascinated by the way the terrain below resembled the service station roadmaps he pored over as a child. He tested himself: *Is that State College below? What is the name of that river? Wasn't there once a Stuckey's at that interchange?* That brought back an unsavory memory – the Stuckey's Pecan Log, a confection that looked as though it should be floating in a toilet bowl.

As the jet passed over the Delaware Water Gap the pilot leaned back toward Gerald and Martina and reported that the New Jersey State Police were again closing major sections of I80.

“Good thing you're up here with me instead of driving down there. Sometime in the last half hour that sniper took some more pot shots along the interstate. Shot out the tires of charter bus full of seniors heading to AC.”

Gerald, who to this point had been conflicted over his unexpected feelings of sorrow and remorse, and increasingly concerned about being discovered as the instigator behind the calamities of the past twenty-four hours, perked up at the news about a copycat sniper. Had someone emerged to deflect the investigation away from Tom Stull whose fate remained unknown to Gerald? It was too good to be true – it had to be a sign that events were going to unfold in his favor.

Gerald was thrilled. By now, Tom must be in the morgue, and that fucker Sinisa should be dead or close to it, gasping for air like a fugu fish right before being filleted tableside for a bunch of Tokyo businessmen by a chef licensed to handle the creature's poisonous innards. As he constructed his plan Gerald was concerned that should Sinisa preserve the cocaine-ricin mixture instead of snorting it immediately he would have to deal with the Serb and his Neanderthal demands for continued payouts. With the news of the copycat shooter, Gerald's confidence was restored and he felt confident that Sinisa took the bait – a subhuman hedonist like Sinisa could never summon the willpower to delay gratification.

The jet flew over Sea Bright, New Jersey, and made a wide, graceful bank to the left above the Atlantic Ocean, then headed north toward the entrance to New York harbor en route to Teterboro Airport. The weather was perfect; not a sign of the hard rain predicted the previous day by the clownish weathermen on local TV. Gerald sat back in the custom-upholstered swivel leather seat staring out the window at the countless fuel-oil tanks in Jersey that appeared from the sky to be a scattered handful of Quaaludes. He looked to his right across the aisle and out the window, past the dozing Martina, and spotted one of his favorite landmarks – the elegantly-shaped Coney Island parachute drop. To Gerald's eye the slender structure rising upward like a derrick, a gusher of oil rendered in delicate steel, was more beautiful than the Eiffel Tower. Of all the structures in and around New York City, the parachute drop was the one object he consistently sought out from the air when returning from a long trip, the one he found most comforting, the landmark that singularly welcomed him back to New York City.

He thought about Wren. What was she doing at this very moment?

Has the impact of Sinisa's death sunk in? Gerald felt sure he was truly dead. Was she overwhelmed with joy for her new freedom and anticipating the day when she would become the new Mrs. Gerald Pfalzgraf? What would she make of it all?

Just then the muffled sounds of "Do the Strand" emanated from the inside pocket of Gerald's suit jacket hanging over the back of his seat. He jumped up and tried to retrieve the cell phone quickly, and the more frenetically he pawed over his jacket the longer it took to find it. Finally, on the screen: "Mom." Gerald walked to the back of the plane even though he was supposed to be strapped in for landing and his phone should have been turned off.

"Wren, what's going on?"

Gerald had registered a cell phone under his mother's name and given it to Wren to be used solely to call him and receive calls from him.

"Gerald, love, where are you?"

"I'm about to land at Teterboro. You sound agitated, Wren. What's the matter?" A pause. "Wren, you there? What's the matter?"

Over the intercom: "Mr. Pfalzgraf. Please take your seat."

Wren finally blurted out, "Sinisa's dead! He fell down the stairs last night and I guess he broke his neck. I passed by his flat last night after work and the police and ambulances were outside. They only told me they found Sinisa dead at the bottom of the stairwell."

Gerald took a seat in the last row of the Citation, balanced the cell phone between his shoulder and left ear, and buckled the belt – all the while expressing a look of sublime satisfaction. He tried to sound surprised. "Jesus Christ! Where are you now, Wren?"

"Home."

"Listen carefully, Wren. Don't try to go to Sinisa's apartment. Stay away from there. As soon as Sinisa's asshole buddies find out he's dead,

they'll come looking for the money he owes his boss. If they don't find anything, they might look for you. Maybe even come to your apartment – they probably know where you live.” As soon as he spoke, Gerald realized his admonishments would alarm Wren, so he quickly added, “I mean, don't panic or anything. I'm just thinking it would be best for you to go to a hotel until I can meet up with you to make arrangements for your safety.”

Gerald glanced out the window at the Manhattan skyline and at the piers on the far West side. He spotted the pair of companion glass high-rise buildings by Richard Meier at the foot of Perry and Charles Streets. Farther north protruding above the many nineteenth century brick buildings were more steel-and-glass structures that had recently gone up in the Meatpacking District. Gerald had an idea.

“I have an idea – how about staying at the Hotel Gansevoort for awhile? We have a standing reservation there. Just tell the desk clerk you're a client of Pfalzgraf Associates. Give them the code 'LC4.' I'll call ahead and have your name added to the client list.” In addition to his desire to keep Wren safe from the potential onslaught of Serbian mobsters seeking out Sinisa's arrears, Gerald wanted her to stay clear of the apartment in case some of the ricin-infected cocaine lingered amidst the environs of Sinisa's railroad abode.

“OK, Ger. I'll do whatever you say. I'm completely dumbfounded.”

“Don't say anything.”

“I need you. I can't wait to see you.” After a few seconds, “Why are you flying into town today? I thought you had a big meeting and wouldn't be home for another day.”

Gerald resisted the urge to declare that Morcilla was dead – that would no doubt be too much for Wren to absorb. So he answered, “A bit of a plan change. I'll tell you all about it when I see you. Soon.”

“OK, Ger. I don’t know what to say. Who would have guessed it? Sinisa . . .”

“Goodbye, Wren. I love you. See you later.”

The pilot hit the tarmac at Teterboro hard and the resulting slam dislodged Gerald’s Blackberry from his hand which then slid under the seats ahead of him to the front of the aircraft. When the jet stopped at the hangar and the pilot shut down the aircraft systems, Martina unbuckled her belt, bent down to retrieve Gerald’s Blackberry, glanced at the screen and asked, “How is your mother doing, Gerald?”

Gerald had engineered a substantial quantity of human carnage in a short span of time for an individual saddled with a full-time job running a multi-million dollar business. But they were a mere drop in the ocean of new and ongoing law enforcement investigations, blending seamlessly with the background noise. In New York City alone about 55,000 people die each year and of that roughly six hundred are murder victims. Another five hundred are suicides. The NYPD has a lot on its plate each day and the misfortunes of a victim of an apparently random subway assault and a despondent pedophile architect would not draw special attention.

In the case of Tom Stull the police canvassed the area and interviewed a handful of straphangers who verified that a grungy-looking bagman was present on the platform about the time the incident occurred. A couple people noted the man's gnarly teeth. A jerky black-and-white video tape documented the man entering the platform at 14th Street, corroborating the eye-witness accounts. But none actually witnessed Tom being shoved onto the tracks. The motorman, positioned on the right side, away from the platform, merely saw a body tumble into his path. The other surveillance cameras in this part of the station were not positioned to capture activity behind the end pillar. He could have simply tripped or even hopped in on purpose, despondent over life's unfairness. Although they were not completely certain that Tom had been pushed onto the tracks by an assailant, the police released a rough composite sketch of the bagman anyway. It

bore no resemblance to Oscar Dupree whatsoever; the teeth alone in the composite were enough to disqualify Oscar.

Tom's wife Tori took the news of the accident poorly. Not only did she lose her husband, whom she cared for very much, but worse, she never got to benefit from the secretive savior Tom believed would help them resolve their financial and legal difficulties. She mentioned to the investigators Tom's cryptic statement on the day of the highway sniper shooting about a friend who was going to quash – or was it squash? – the inquiry into her eBay problem. If only she could remember the friend's name – George, maybe? Or Gary?

The police were more interested to learn why Tom was in the subway station at 11 o'clock that night in the first place. Was there another love interest involved in Mr. Stull's life, perhaps? After all, he and Mrs. Stull lived apart. Did Mrs. Stull ever suspect any homosexual tendencies in her husband that might compel him to cruise the underground caverns of the West Village? It was more common than people might think. Tom's proximity to the I80 sniper shooting was passed off as nothing more than a conversational tidbit.

Tori's juvenile shoulder-shrugging and incessant nervous petting of her dog Go-Go during police questioning combined with her admission that she was under investigation by the FBI for fraud served as a big disincentive for the police to break a sweat trying to unravel cryptic messages from Tom about secretive friends. Although Tori revealed Tom's financial troubles with the bank and the looming repossession of paving equipment, the police concluded the suicide theory was not viable. Neither was the gay cruising theory. They settled on an explanation: Tom was the unfortunate victim of a random act of violence committed by a disturbed homeless man who probably perceived

Tom as a frightening apparition conjured up by the ingestion of large quantities of Mr. Boston products.

The bank repossessed some of TS Erection's big equipment, curtailing the company's ability to bid on new contracts and complete those already underway, eventually driving it into insolvency. The firm's assets were auctioned off, including a Caterpillar asphalt paver holding \$25,000 in cash and a Remington 700 bolt-action rifle with a scope and bipod that Tom had hidden behind a panel inside a toolbox compartment. That loot would not be discovered for more than twenty years by a pleasantly surprised contractor in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba.

Tom was eulogized by a few friends in a small Catholic church and was buried in Aliquippa next to his parents. An obituary in the local paper mentioned that Tom's service in the Army as a Squad Designated Marksman. Just before Tori was indicted for fraud she received a bill from the funeral director which included a large surcharge to cover the extra expense of preparing Tom's bisected body.

No law enforcement official in New York or New Jersey for a moment suspected Tom Stull was the "crazed" sniper who killed two people and shot up a bunch of vehicles along I80, for the simple reason that a nineteen-year-old hick named Beauregard "Boy" Crowder – the copycat sniper who shot out the tires of a bus transporting elderly ladies to Atlantic City the day after Morcilla was killed – was caught and subsequently took credit for all the mayhem. People who knew Boy Crowder thought of him as something of a nitwit and questioned whether he had the skills necessary to shoot targets so precisely as they moved along at highway speeds. But the New Jersey State Police, having failed to stop a second round of shooting in as many days were eager to perp-walk the fool and close the case. Millions of drivers who regularly travel I80 demanded action. The local police chief had done

several TV interviews boasting about the savvy with which he and his team led the investigation and broke open the case. By the time the media-drunk chief appeared on Tyra Banks' show, any desire on the part of the New Jersey State Police to prolong the investigation dissipated.

In Chelsea, the NYPD conducted a very cursory examination into Sinisa's demise. Across the board they despised the Serbian strongman. When the cruiser pulled up to the railroad apartment that evening to respond to the accident report, the cops were fairly certain the victim would either be Sinisa or an enemy of his – one or the other. When the two policemen first came upon Sinisa's body as it lay on the floor of the stairwell landing, his bloody head twisted grotesquely, one said to the other, "Shhh. I think he's sleeping. Don't disturb the Serb." They both laughed out loud, their robust guffaws echoing in the stairwell. The detective who showed up shortly afterward assumed immediately that Sinisa had tripped down the stairs in a liquor-and-drug-induced stupor. The mirror and steel straw were still sitting on the coffee-table which was sprayed with drying vomit. The detective found some of Sinisa's own ricin-free coke in the pocket of a jacket thrown across the sofa. The Salisbury steak, now a piece of raku, was retrieved from the oven which Sinisa had never shut off. And the Chelsea Boys reported that Sinisa had knocked on their door less than an hour before the accident, apparently too stoned to recognize he was on the wrong floor. The gay couple lived right below Sinisa, and they would attest to hearing him pound around the floor that night and then stagger out of his apartment.

Of primary interest to the detective was the presence of \$50,000 in brand new hundred dollar bills, each wrapped in a stack and tied with a ribbon emblazoned with the logo of the Borgata Hotel and Casino.

Undoubtedly, he figured, the cash horde was an element in a criminal enterprise, as was the contents of the leather toolbag – pliers, gardening shears, a blow-torch, band-aids, an ice-axe and a straight-jacket. What the hell would he be doing with a straight-jacket and the assortment of tools if not to torture some poor bastard who owed money? *Sick fuck.*

Wren came under some very softball interrogation, having elicited sympathy from the police for having once been hooked up to the demented Sinisa. Her alibi – working for hours that evening at Public Hair, verified by numerous patrons – held up well. Furthermore, the presence in the oven of the very, very well-done Salisbury steak also backed up Wren's claims, and served as something of a forensic timeline of her activities. The detective made some cursory inquiries to understand why she had come to Sinisa's apartment ("to give him back his jewelry") and why she had the cab driver come by his place after she got out of work ("hoping to see him there so I would know he wasn't lurking around my apartment.") Wren explained in some detail how Sinisa grabbed her by the hair and demanded she come back to him and make him dinner.

"Make him dinner? Seriously?" The detective scanned Wren's legs from her ass to her ankles. "You mean he didn't try to fuck – I mean, take advantage of you?"

The question was blunt and painful, and Wren thought out of line. Her lower lip quivered, and before she could muster a protest, the detective back-pedaled. "I'm sorry, ma'am. That was uncalled for. Please accept my apology."

The detective converged on a narrative: Sinisa came home stoned and drunk – probably after relieving some unfortunate mark of \$50,000 – sat down, snorted cocaine, walked to the stairwell on his way outside

to get some air, lost his balance and fell down the stairs. Boom. Done. The idea that Sinisa might have received help falling down the stairs never entered the detective's mind. He was too interested in following the money to bigger, more important living criminals.

"Ma'am, we found a great deal of cash in Sinisa's apartment the night he died. It was stashed in his toolbag. What do you know about that?"

Wren felt like telling the detective the interview was over, after his coarse remark, but she cooperated instead. "Really? Well, let me think . . . I'm pretty sure he owed a lot of money to a friend. Maybe he . . ."

"A friend? Are you sure? Who? How much?"

"Uh, maybe not a friend. More like his boss. I don't know who he is, but Sinisa told me recently that he owed someone \$100,000."

"No kidding? Look, we know Sinisa was involved to some extent with organized crime. Where do you think he got the cash?"

"How much cash was in his bag, Detective?"

"You don't know?"

"No – I never saw any money."

"There was . . . well, a lot. Let's just say more than \$10,000 . . ."

"Oh my God!" Wren's expression suggested she had a theory in mind.

The detective asked Wren to continue. "'Oh my God' what?"

"Maybe Sinisa stole the money from someone he was working with. A man he said he was going to meet at the Borgata Hotel in Atlantic City."

The mention of the Borgata intrigued the detective. "You sure about that? The Borgata?"

"Yes. He told me he met a man there who wanted to hire him for a job, but now I think he might have stolen money from him instead."

"What was the guy's name?"

Wren remembered that the first syllable was “Ger.” She recalled her shock when Sinisa spoke the man’s name and she initially thought he was going to say “Gerald.”

“I think it was Gerasik, or something like that.”

“Jurassic? Like the dinosaur movie?”

Wren shrugged.

“And you never saw the money Sinisa had in his bag?” The detective wanted to be convinced that Wren had not seen the stacks of hundreds tied with the Borgata ribbons.

“Never.”

“Tell me, did Sinisa know where you lived?”

“Yes sir. Lately he had been coming by to harass me.”

When Wren addressed the detective as “sir” even though it was undeserved after his a crude remark, he felt doubly obliged to treat her with respect and consideration. He explained that if it was true Sinisa extorted money from this guy “Gerasik” in Atlantic City to pay down a debt owed to an organized crime boss, then it wouldn’t be safe for her to be anywhere near the apartment building. “As it stands now, it appears Sinisa never made the payment to his boss because he died instead. The mob is gonna come looking.”

The detective went on to explain that it might not be safe for Wren to stay in her own apartment for the time being. He jotted down the number of her cell phone – not the one given to her by Gerald – and advised her to contact his office with her address once she settled into a temporary location. He also suggested she take some time off from her job at Public Hair until the police had a better handle on what Sinisa’s mobster buddies planned to do. The detective did not tell Wren that a special unit of the NYPD would be using the money in Sinisa’s toolbag as bait to lure members of the crime family in an attempt to identify key players and follow their movements. The cops were highly confident

that someone would soon come looking for it, and sure enough, ninety-six hours after Sinisa's death two men previously unknown to the authorities arrived at the railroad apartment, jimmied the lock and turned the place upside down, eventually discovering the cash hanging in a waterproof bag inside the toilet tank. A small, advanced RFID chip was affixed to one of the Borgata ribbons whereby the police tracked the mobsters to a warehouse in Queens. The crime boss reluctantly concluded that the tidy stacks of cash taken from the toilet tank represented all of Sinisa's money. He ordered three of Sinisa's colleagues to make up the remaining \$50,000 still unaccounted for plus another \$10,000 for the inconvenience. The three goons never had a chance to shake anyone down because the NYPD made wholesale arrests when it appeared serious violence was imminent.

Gerald predicted the authorities would set a trap with Sinisa's money, which was why he was willing to part with fifty thousand real dollars; by leaving so much cash behind, Gerald hoped to make the mobsters think Sinisa had planned to clear his debt and they would not try to hunt down Wren in the belief she had run off with any of their money. Gerald considered this a brilliant deception and was proud for including it in his plan. A student of Machiavelli, Gerald was also necessarily an admirer of Sun Tzu and his observation that all war is based on deception.

The time it took the detective to close the case was only marginally longer than the time it took Sinisa to succumb to the difficult-to-trace effects of ricin inhalation. No tests were performed to determine if Sinisa had been poisoned as there was no reason to suspect it. The coroner quickly ruled his death accidental; a simple but fatal tumble down a flight of stairs precipitated by extreme alcohol and drug consumption.

Wren moved into a suite at the Hotel Gansevoort as the guest of Pfalzgraf Associates using the alias given to her by Gerald: Dominique Francon – Gerald thought Wren looked like a Dominique. He had her use the alias ostensibly to protect her from the Serbian gang, but in reality he wanted to keep her real name from showing up somewhere in the company's records down the line.

It was by the luxurious rooftop pool at the Gansevoort on her first full day there, having lunch and waiting to hear from Gerald that Wren nearly choked on her \$28 hamburger upon spotting an obituary in the New York Times headlined “Morcilla Pfalzgraf, Art Patron, Socialite, Victim of ‘180 Sniper’.”

Having suffered two bizarre losses within twenty-four hours of each other, Gerald had a bit more difficulty with the police than Wren did, but he was confident it was nothing he couldn't handle. He had to divide his time among the New Jersey State Police, the Warren County Sheriff's office and the NYPD, each more eager to close cases than to excavate for reasons to keep them open. Gerald was a rich, successful businessman, and although he was positioned to acquire even more wealth following his wife's grisly death, the notion that he could be connected to a random act of violence perpetrated by a crazed sniper never entered the realm of possibility. No, Morcilla's death was ruled a homicide by the authorities, and pinned on Boy Crowder who chose to copy Tom Stull and take credit for all the mayhem committed over those two days. The more Crowder's handful of backwoods relatives urged the police to consider a second-sniper theory the deeper the man – now known around the country as the "I80 Inbreed" after a NY Post headline – augured into his story. Common sense and the lack of evidence suggesting the involvement of another sniper, coupled with Crowder's proud confession were enough to hammer down the lid. Living his whole life in poverty and anonymity, Boy Crowder relished the attention, albeit negative, and although he had never heard of Andy Warhol, he epitomized the artist's observation that everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes. Gerald received the sincere condolences of all the investigating agencies.

The NYPD began their investigation into Oscar's suicide before

Gerald returned from Arbogast's place. And knowing that he was rushing back to Manhattan to deal with the murder of his wife, they chose to be minimally invasive, at least until after Morcilla's funeral. They questioned several of Gerald's employees, concentrating on those who, until recently, were on the team of architects led by Oscar. Detective Dunn was intrigued when he learned from the team members that Oscar recently had been demoted from the leadership position, although none could say for sure why. Paul Clay the surveyor retold the story of Oscar embarrassing the company in front of a major client, and how Gerald was very pissed about it.

On first inspection the detective found nothing to suggest foul play. To the naked eye it seemed exactly what it appeared to be: a man with some problems hung himself in his office late at night. This sort of thing happened all the time, usually when an employee had been or was about to be fired. Sometimes a person having a difficult emotional time would kill himself at work instead of at home to spare his family the shock of finding his corpse, but Oscar apparently had no immediate family. More likely, he had hung himself at work as a way of getting back at his employer; forcing him to face the consequences of his maltreatment. Still, Clay's story and the interviews with other Pfalzgraf employees didn't seem to Dunn to contain any components that would drive a man to commit suicide.

When Gerald came to his office from the morgue after identifying Morcilla's body – the most difficult task he had to endure throughout the whole undertaking, witnessing for the first time in his life the devastation visited upon a human head by a high-powered rifle round – Dunn greeted him respectfully, and offered to conduct his interview after the funeral. Gerald insisted on getting it over with right then and there. He would be incredibly preoccupied with Morcilla's funeral arrangements, making it difficult to schedule a meeting in the

near future. Also, Gerald had something he wanted to discuss with the detective, something that might shine some bright light on the situation. Something Gerald assumed would close the case ASAP on the “suicide” of Oscar Dupree.

Gerald took the detective into his office, closed the door, pulled down the shades, powered-up his iMac and launched the ExaTrac software package. Gerald explained how he debated with himself over what to do with respect to the child pornography on Oscar’s workstation, deciding, wrongly as he now understands, to give Oscar a chance to redeem himself. “I slammed him pretty hard and threatened to turn him over to the authorities if he didn’t straighten out. I demoted him, cut his pay, and took him off a key project. I suspect he thought he might get arrested at any moment, and the pressure of that got to him.” Gerald mentioned all these punishments because he assumed his employees would have already briefed the detective on them.

Dunn noted that Gerald offered an opinion on Oscar’s motive to commit suicide. He knew from experience, and from watching *Barnaby Jones*, that people who are culpable will often proffer opinions to the authorities to steer investigations away from themselves.

“Why didn’t you notify the authorities right away about Mr. Dupree’s possession of child pornography? You must know it’s illegal?”

Sensing the conversation was going in the wrong direction, Gerald replied, “I thought if I was strict with him, and I got rid of the stuff by replacing his workstation with a brand new, clean model, he would toe the line going forward.”

“But you didn’t get rid of the stuff. You kept a copy in this tracking program.” Gerald fought the urge to swallow. “Why did you monitor Mr. Dupree’s computer? Did you suspect him of something? Did you hold this over his head to get something out of him, as a threat

maybe?" Dunn's style of questioning unnerved Gerald. *Jesus Christ, I gotta dig out of this right now.*

"Detective Dunn, please understand. I had the software installed to protect my company's intellectual property. I monitored everyone's workstations. I had no idea Oscar was downloading this material until I looked at the files. I really wanted him to move beyond this and get back to being a solid architect for the firm. I didn't want to ruin the man's life by turning him in. I did warn him that he was at risk of being dismissed, but I focused my attention on executing a combination of punishment and reward. A carrot-and-stick approach, if you will." Gerald mentally scolded himself for using the word "executing" – sounded like an assassin's choice of terms. "The only thing I wanted to get out of him was improved performance."

Gerald wanted to fall back on the recent loss of his wife and the grief he was feeling to postpone the inquiry, but he suspected that Dunn would take that as a dodge, and redouble his efforts to look beyond the simple explanation that Oscar hung himself because he was despondent.

"Carrot-and-stick. I see. So, again, why did you keep these files?"

Gerald turned away from Dunn, toward the shaded window, to hide his face while he struggled for an explanation. Then, he turned back and replied, "In my business, it's common for architects who get fired to file lawsuits later, claiming bias or discrimination. I wouldn't put it past Oscar, so I kept the files in case I needed to show his termination was based on legitimate reasons."

Dunn looked in Gerald's eyes for a moment, and then he jotted something in his pad. Gerald tried to remain calm.

"Well you really should have turned this over to the authorities," Dunn said. "Transmission and possession of child pornography is a felony. I'll be calling in the department's IT specialists to go through

your company's computers to ensure nothing else illegal has been archived. With your permission, naturally." Gerald nodded in the affirmative – was there any other response he could give that wouldn't raise an eyebrow?

"They'll also properly dispose of the offending files. In the meantime, please accept my deepest sympathy for your loss. It must be very hard to deal with the death of your wife and the suicide of your employee, y'know, both happening at the same time. Bizarre, really. I appreciate your cooperation, Mr. Pfalzgraf."

"Thank you, Detective Dunn."

"You know," added Dunn, "To lose a spouse, Mr. Pfalzgraf, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both a spouse and an employee looks like carelessness."

"What's that you said?" Gerald reacted with a mixture of surprise and agitation, and he feared he may have stepped into some sort of trap laid by Dunn.

"Oscar Wilde. . . No? Not familiar? *The Importance of Being Earnest*? Never mind, I thought you might recognize it. Have a nice day Mr. Pfalzgraf."

Gerald wasn't sure what to make of it. He became extremely anxious that the police force's IT department might come across some shred of evidence on his own computer linking him to something nefarious. He had no time to contemplate it or take preemptive actions; if he started erasing files now they would surely detect that activity documented down to the millisecond in some deep dark operating system log.

Should something damning be discovered on his computer, well, then for his lapse he would suffer the consequences, plain and simple, which would be formidable for sure.

Wren resisted the overwhelming urge to call Gerald. Several times while sitting by the pool she typed the numbers of his cell phone into her own, only to finish by pressing the red button instead of the green one. Surely Gerald was thoroughly occupied with the fallout from his wife's death: making funeral arrangements, communicating with her circle of friends and the dozens of society folk Morcilla associated with (and Gerald largely despised), dealing with the police. The thought of the police and their investigation into Morcilla's bizarre fate on Interstate 80 led Wren to ponder what she was forced to acknowledge was the infinitesimal probability that both Gerald's wife and her own sociopath "boyfriend" – the dual impediments to their happiness together – had been simultaneously and randomly eliminated. Over the course of her affair with Gerald, Wren developed an understanding of him as an intelligent, thoughtful, interesting, generous companion, but she also believed him to possess a mysterious side that revealed itself to a small but noticeable degree through his macabre sense of humor and maniacal attention to detail. His regular references to Machiavelli, cute at first, reflected an amoral side that Gerald seemed less and less interested in masking. What were the odds that the deaths of both Morcilla and Sinisa – *within twenty-four hours of each other!* – were entirely unrelated, random events? She already knew the answer, as she had arrived at it many times since reading the obit: infinitesimal. Still, if the deaths were not unrelated random events, how could such a plan have been engineered and how could Gerald have done it? There, she said it: How could Gerald – *Gerald* – have done it? And immediately

she felt ashamed for thinking he would go so far as to architect a double-murder. Yes, Gerald did say he would help Wren solve her Sinisa problem, and in time extricate himself from Morcilla, but Wren always understood the path to freedom would involve a costly divorce for Gerald followed by a move by the couple far away from New York City and the reach of the Serb. It never occurred to Wren that Gerald would resort to murder, and he never suggested it himself. Except for that time after they attended *Elektra* in Charleston – that conversation seemed to graze the realm of murder. But he was drunk – fifty percent as she recalled it, although he insisted on thirty-three and a third.

Wren adjusted the umbrella protecting her milky skin from the sun, rolled over onto her stomach on the chaise longue and adjusted her bikini bottom, and just as she got comfortable an attendant by the pool stepped sprightly to her side and informed “Ms. Francon” that she had a call. She could take it at the bar.

“Hello?”

“Wren, baby, how are you? Miss me?”

“Ger, oh Ger. I miss you so much. You know I do! Where are you?” She hesitated, then in an attempt to sound suitably respectful when addressing a recent widower, she declared, “I’m so sorry to hear about your wife – what a tragedy. Do you . . .”

“Listen, Wren – there’s too much to talk about on the phone. It’s been a crazy couple of days. Can you meet me at Ono tonight – say 8? I have to talk to you.”

“Of course, 8 o’clock. Anything you say, love.”

Before Gerald could respond, a loud voice over the intercom instructed, “Assemble at eleven west for Amtrak’s 645 Keystone to 30th Street Station . . .” He cupped his hand over the receiver of the payphone in Penn Station – he didn’t want Wren to think he was someplace weird. He continued to call from public facilities because

now was not the time to let down his guard and initiate conversations over porous cellular airwaves. Gerald had read about the capabilities of the NSA and it was all very impressive.

Wren asked, somewhat perplexed, "What was that noise, Gerald?"

"I'm . . . uh, it was . . . I don't know. Can you still hear me?"

"Yes, Ger."

"OK. Ono. Tonight at 8. I love you, Wren. More than ever." He hung up before she could reply, but the tenor of the conversation helped Wren get over her mishegos with things infinitesimal. Maybe it was a bigger number than she realized. Wren returned the phone to the bartender, and just as she was about to walk back to the chaise longue, Wren decided to order a Gibson, for at that moment she felt artistic.

ARCHITECTS BELIEVE THAT NOT ONLY DO THEY SIT AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, BUT THAT IF GOD EVER GETS UP, THEY TAKE THE CHAIR.

Karen Moyer

Gerald sat in a dark corner of Ono, the high-end Asian restaurant at street level in the Hotel Gansevoort building on the corner of Thirteenth and Hudson Streets. Pastis was around the corner, and when Gerald spotted the two-story brick building with the yellow and white façade and the red awnings and the French bistro markings that were just so *comme il faut*, he remembered that it was the place he last ate a meal together with Morcilla. And how did he behave? – like a total asshole. He shook his head, at first in amazement at the lengths he had gone to secure his current status, then to cast out such thoughts from his mind. He sipped his drink and folded his ear in and out, waiting anxiously for Wren to arrive.

Gerald was wearing a custom-made Kiton suit that had set him back \$12,500, a white, single-needle stitched broadcloth Lauren shirt with a spread-collar, and a somber tie fashioned into a Windsor knot. He had on the vintage 1932 Patek Philippe Calatrava wristwatch given to him by Morcilla's father for his thirtieth birthday and a pair of sterling silver cufflinks modeled after the cross-section of the columns used in Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion. Gerald had sketched out the idea for the cufflinks and commissioned a silversmith to fabricate them. Sitting on the lacquered table before him was a Maker's Mark Manhattan straight up in a glass almost large enough to accommodate a diving board. Gerald recalled the Manhattans his grandmother used to drink on the rare occasions the extended Pfalzgraf family dined at one of the better restaurants in town, and how the cocktails were served in modest-sized stemware capable of holding a perhaps three or

four ounces. Today, upscale bars served up exotic, stylish cocktails that exceeded twelve ounces and cost north of \$25 each.

Gerald had already drunk more than half the Manhattan even though he had been in Ono for fewer than fifteen minutes, for he was uncharacteristically nervous. He sincerely had no idea how his conversation with Wren would unfold but he knew she was inquisitive enough to have dreamed up a half-dozen or more scenarios to explain the events of the previous days. As the tall waitress approached him boasting broad, dark tattoos on her wrists that from afar looked like bruises from being shackled, Gerald gulped the rest of his drink so that her trip to his table would not be wasted. "One more exactly like that one, doll."

Well into his second cocktail Gerald glanced at the Calatrava watch and upon noting the time to be 8:30 he became moderately perturbed. Then he felt a wave of panic – *maybe Wren's not planning to show up!* Did she settle on the notion that some nefarious act had in fact taken place, and that Gerald was the architect of it? *Is she frightened or untrusting of me? Is she talking to the police right now?* Outside on Thirteenth a police car passed slowly in front of the restaurant, its lights flashing, an epileptic fit waiting to happen. Gerald instinctively took a long pull on his drink, and he was about to walk outside for some air when Wren strolled through the door looking like a million dollars. She was wearing the Alexander McQueen cap-sleeve dress that Gerald had given her for their six-month anniversary, and one of the few items of clothing she hurriedly packed before leaving her apartment. She was late to her date with Gerald because she had taken maximum advantage of the services provided by the Hotel Gansevoort's luxurious spa – all paid for out of her own pocket so she wouldn't feel too much like a freeloader – and the totality of it all set her back two hours. Gerald could think of just one word: stunning. The maitre d' immediately and

without question escorted Wren to Gerald's table, assuming no other destination in the restaurant would make more sense. When Gerald stood up to embrace Wren the two looked as though they should be in Hollywood.

Wren ordered a saketini – some sort of cocktail mixed with sake and garnished with a cucumber slice – and Gerald ordered another Manhattan, and when the waitress departed he took Wren's hands in his and said, "You look stunning. I missed you so much I can't begin to tell you. I'm so sorry you had to go through that ugliness at Sinisa's apartment building all alone. How are you holding up?"

Her misty eyes welled up faster than her tear ducts could channel away the flow. "Right now, I'm doing much better. It was awful, Ger, at first. But after one night of peaceful sleep, I felt liberated. It's just the craziest thing – one moment he was pulling my hair and swearing at me in his crude way, and the next moment, he's dead and gone. And I'm not ashamed to say I'm glad. Really glad – thrilled, actually." She dabbed the corners of her eyes and smiled; she allowed herself a demure laugh. Gerald smiled too, partially in response to her happiness and partially as a congratulatory gesture to his own cleverness. He squeezed her hands, and then backed away as the tall waitress set down the two voluminous cocktails. Gerald asked her to come back in about twenty minutes with two menus.

"Wren, you deserve to be free of that psychopath. The way I see it, he was destined to make an early exit from life. He hung around violent people, he was a drug addict, he was a criminal. He must have had myriad enemies." As soon as he spoke the word "myriad" he feared he sounded scripted. "When I think about it, y'know, I'm surprised he survived as long as he did. Aren't you?"

Wren twirled her glass like she always did when the two had conversations over cocktails served in stemware. "You're right, Ger. I'm

lucky he wound up going out alone instead of taking me with him. . . . You know, I wanted so much to thank you that night.”

Gerald cocked his head signaling a desire for elaboration when in fact he thought Wren suspected he might have had something to do with Sinisa's demise. He noted that Wren had not once described Sinisa's death as an accident. Damn, he was paranoid. “What for, doll?”

“For being there for me always. For being willing to help me get away from that bastard. I know that had Sinisa survived his accident you would have continued to work out a plan for us to get away from him somehow.” She said “accident” and with that cue Gerald retook Wren's hands into his own and kissed them softly. “But enough about my drama. What about you, Ger? I don't know what to say. It's such a shock. What a senseless crime. I'm really sorry.” Wren tried to conceal any element of relief that Morcilla was out of the picture. And she tried to conceal any latent concerns she had that Gerald might have been involved in either or both of the deaths. Regardless, she could not bring herself to utter the name “Morcilla.”

Likewise, Gerald tried to mask his true feelings, too. “Yes, a tragically senseless crime committed by a subhuman inbred. That cocksucker Crowder is even quoted in the papers bragging about the shootings like he's Lee Fucking Harvey . . . uh, Lee Fucking Oswald.” Gerald furrowed his brow and looked askance when neither of these names sounded quite right. He got that disturbing feeling drinkers get when they approach their blood-alcohol limit and realize they will inexorably surpass it, even if they stop imbibing forthwith. Now he would have to mind every word he said carefully to ensure nothing silly or incriminating spilled forth from his mouth, and the thought of engaging in such vigilance for the remainder of the evening made him feel tired. “Morcilla and I had our differences, but she didn't deserve to be mowed down randomly by a lunatic sniper. Anyway, I was already

making substantial progress toward working out a settlement with her that would leave me and my company financially viable.” *Why did I just say that? Makes it sound like divorce was just a backup plan to a more elaborate effort to have Morcilla’s head split in half by a round fired by a hired gun.* “Let me put it this way: I would never wish Morcilla dead, but now that she is, I have to move forward, and that means being with you. What can I say – it’s the truth. I love you, Wren. I always have. And now through the most bizarre twists of fate we can be together.”

Wren nodded and twirled her drink. She appeared deep in thought.

Neither spoke for a period bordering on the uncomfortable before Gerald asked, “Are you hungry, Wren? I am. Let’s order. Have you eaten here before – really good striped bass, if you don’t mind looking at the fish’s head. They sort of bend it up ninety degrees so that it stares straight at you from the plate.”

Wren ordered the futomaki of Alaskan king crab, avocado, cucumber, and tobiko, and a side of shiso fried rice. And another saketini. Gerald was starving, and he needed some food to sop up the liquor sloshing in his stomach; he ordered spicy tuna tartare with tatsoi, mizuna, and watercress vinaigrette, and Kobe beef tartare with ponzu, quail egg and crispy sesame wafers. And as soon as he closed the menu and handed it to the waitress who briskly strutted off toward the bar, he recalled that lunch across the street at Pastis with Morcilla – the one in which he wolfed down a plate of raw beef and subsequently threw it all back up – and questioned the wisdom of his choices. “Miss,” he called to waitress, considering calling her back to make a change, then, “uh . . . another Manhattan, please.” Fuck it, he thought. *Real men eat it raw.*

After the meal, Gerald and Wren took the elevator up to Plunge, the rooftop bar by the pool, and nursed a couple of Sambucas. The sun had set long ago but the sky was bright – full of stars, a waxing moon,

Venus, and light reflecting off the water from buildings on the Jersey side of the Hudson. Both Gerald and Wren were certifiably drunk and a bit sloppy. The bartender was completing the end-of-shift paperwork. Right before he left, Gerald bribed him to unlock the door to the pool.

The couple sat side-by-side on chaise longues by the pool, alone on the rooftop. Wren threw Gerald a mischievous grin and tilted her head toward the pool. Gerald could only make an educated guess at what would happen next. Somehow, in the clutches of a five-Manhattans-plus-two-Sambucas dinner, Gerald was able to spring a solid erection. He sat on the edge of the pool dangling his legs in the warm water while Wren gave him the best blow job of his life. After draining his cock for dessert, Wren directed Gerald to a spot under an imported palm tree on the rooftop deck where she straddled his face and rocked her hips with abandon. When Wren ejaculated a tiny, thin stream onto Gerald's face, his cock swelled to previously uncharted proportions. He positioned Wren onto all fours and made love to her from behind until she screamed for mercy. Gerald momentarily wondered whether all this carnal activity was being recorded on the hotel's surveillance cameras, but he couldn't care less. That was what post-coital moments were for. Until then, Gerald slammed Wren with all his love, and when he concluded he could no longer hold back climax from overtopping the levee, he pulled out and shot a load across her back and into her wet, tangled, blonde hair. He squeezed his eyes so tightly in ecstasy that he visualized concentric circles of purple and yellow like something out of an R. Crumb comic. Wren moaned and ran her fingers through her hair, begging, "More, give me more." Gerald put his head between Wren's legs and teased her pussy into a frenzy, and for his diligence he was rewarded with another shot of female cum on his outstretched tongue. Back in the suite Gerald laid in bed, nearly

comatose, while Wren cleaned up in the bathroom. He wondered how he would manage sex with Wren in ten or fifteen years when she would be in the prime of her life and his cock would bend in the middle. He shook the thought out of his mind – too morbid to contemplate.

He turned his head toward the bathroom and through a crack between the door and the jamb he could see Wren making a note in that secret book of hers – the one in which she documented her “Must-do Fucks.”

The next morning on the rooftop not far from the spot where they made passionate love and where Gerald’s expensive Kiton suit got soaked with pool water, Wren and Gerald consumed a hearty breakfast and joked about the previous evening’s festivities. They both wore the plush terrycloth robes and goofy-looking slippers supplied by the hotel. After the waiter cleared the table and scraped away the toast crumbs, Gerald took a sip of Darjeeling tea and said to Wren, “There’s something I didn’t tell you about last night, Wren. Do you remember that jerk who worked for me – Oscar? The one I told you about who downloaded pornography onto his computer?”

“Um, yeah. Sure.” She wrinkled her nose in disgust as she had the first time Gerald mentioned the situation to her at Public Hair. “Did you fire him after all, Ger?”

Gerald sucked some air through his clenched his teeth. “No. He . . . he committed suicide.” Wren’s lips parted slightly and she arched her beautiful, spa-sculpted eyebrows. Before she could respond, Gerald continued, “In the office. He hung himself right above his desk. I guess he was desperate. Maybe I was too harsh on him.” He took another sip of tea and gazed away from Wren’s stunned face toward the Empire State Building. He let the debris from the bombshell fall back to earth before saying anything additional.

Wren shook her head in disbelief. Finally she said, "That's unbelievable, Gerald. I'm speechless." She continued to shake her head for several more seconds; Gerald could practically hear the gears moving in her head.

"Think about this," he said. "After the funeral for Morcilla, I might come under some intensive scrutiny from the investigators because of the sheer oddity of two people close to me dying on the same day. The detective in charge of Oscar's suicide struck me as an odd character – someone who might find himself compelled to make a federal case out of it. I'm sure I'll be okay in the end, but in the meantime I don't want to double-up anyone's suspicion by having you close to me. We can't be together for awhile. Do you understand?"

"I'm not sure . . . I guess so . . ."

Gerald didn't like Wren's less-than-firm response. He continued, "You know that every husband married to a rich wife who dies unexpectedly comes under some scrutiny, especially if he immediately takes up with a much younger, more beautiful woman. It screams 'motive.' The cops will want to interview you, Wren, and when they find out you're the same person whose boyfriend died from a fall down the stairs, they won't be able to contain themselves. They'll think they're Barnaby Jones or Angela Lansbury, and start ginning up ludicrous conspiracy theories. It'll be bad for both of us."

"Gerald, did you . . ." Wren let her voice trail off, hoping Gerald would understand how to complete the question. Gerald looked deep into Wren's eyes, casting a neutral expression that divulged no clues to the thoughts in his mind. Realizing this line of questioning was a minefield, Wren veered to a different subject. "I mean, what am I supposed to do? Where am I supposed to live? I can't stay in a hotel forever – I don't want to stay in a hotel."

"I have a plan."

Wren left New York City on a gloriously sunny day with only those possessions that she could fit in single suitcase. The lease on her apartment was just about up so she just walked away. As for Public Hair, Wren mailed in a letter of resignation explaining her desire to try a new line of work, and asked that her final paycheck be given to charity, although she was about ninety-eight percent certain the business manager would pocket the money. She withdrew from a class at NYU on film noir that was to start in a few weeks. Wren accepted a nondescript job upstate handing out swag for a company that arranged and managed horse jumping competitions. Gerald read about the company in a horsey magazine that Morcilla subscribed to, and suggested Wren apply for one of the cleaner positions available. Wren was a natural for the job – pretty, friendly, and tolerant of uncalled-for snobbery. Gerald’s plan called for Wren and him to cease direct interaction for six months; after that time they would reassess whether the police, lawyers, accountants, clients, friends and relatives had moved on appropriately. To supplement Wren’s meager salary during the blackout period, Gerald gave her a small amount of money supplemented by a collection of about forty gift-cards from various chain stores holding a combined value of \$20,000. Gerald chose not to lavish lots of cash on Wren to curtail her from making any large purchases that might attract attention. He asked her not to open a bank account or apply for a credit card. And he decided against mailing her a regular stipend, fearing that some crafty law enforcement agent might take an extracurricular interest in the strange case of Boy Crowder, like those

cops portrayed on TV who violate policy by working on closed cases in their spare time and in the end embarrass their by-the-book superiors by apprehending the real killer.

Gerald arranged to meet briefly one last time with Wren on the Staten Island Ferry just before she departed New York for exile upstate. Prior to the meeting Gerald momentarily debated whether to tell Wren some truth – that he had a little something to do after all with the highway sniper shooting, or that he assisted from afar in Sinisa's demise – but decided against it. He remained convinced that in the end, Wren, left in the dark, would continue to find it impossible to fathom how anyone could engineer such a complex plan to have multiple people murdered. It was easy for her to swallow the stories in the papers: that a sole idiot gunman shot at a bunch of vehicles on I80 and killed a couple of people, including Morcilla Pfalzgraf; and that a two-bit, drug-addled thug died of blunt head trauma after falling down a flight of stairs. In a strange way, Gerald felt slightly insulted that Wren would come to dismiss the possibility that he was capable of planning murder. On the other hand, he couldn't take credit for the serendipitous emergence of the copycat shooter which significantly enhanced the ruse. In the end, he derailed the whole irrational train of thought. What he didn't know was that Wren harbored an uncomfortable feeling that the man Sinisa had met in AC – "Gerasik" as she recalled – might somehow be connected to Gerald. Was he someone Gerald hired to commit some offense for their mutual benefit?

It was hot and muggy in Lower Manhattan on the afternoon that Gerald and Wren, separated by ten minutes and thousands of passengers, boarded the ferry – the *Alice Austen* according to the name on the escutcheon – but by the time they met on the forward deck after the ship left South Ferry for St. George Terminal, the refreshing harbor

breeze had thankfully reduced the temperature and humidity. Wren was admiring from afar the old Castle Williams on Governor's Island, her bare arms crossed tightly to shield against the wind, when Gerald walked up from behind and wrapped his arms around her. He kissed her right ear and whispered, "Hello, luscious." He was wearing the same wild-looking lavender Versace suit with broad grey stripes that he had on the day he met Sinisa at the Borgata, although this time he matched it with a white shirt open at the collar.

"Mmm . . . hello, lover. Hug me tighter."

Almost on cue, Gerald sprung an erection and he pressed it into Wren's hip as he embraced her. "Did you know that the nautical term 'fathom' – you know, six feet – originally meant 'a hug'?"

"No, I didn't, Mr. Pfalzgraf. Were you a sailor? What else do you know?"

"Oh plenty, Wren. For example, I think we're standing on the fo'c's'le."

"Foke-sull? How do you spell that?"

"I'm not sure. I can never remember if there are two apostrophes or three?" After a long pause, Gerald said, "I'm going to miss you, doll. I'll be going crazy without you for the next six months."

Wren rotated her body to face Gerald while remaining in his embrace. Her eyes were watery. "Me too, Ger. Are you sure this is the best thing to do?"

"Right now, at this moment, no. But we both know that we have to separate for awhile. Until the investigations are closed and things get back to normal."

"I understand. And I appreciate all the help you've given me. Maybe if we focus on our work the time will fly by quickly. I hope I don't forget how to make a Gibson while I'm living in the sticks."

"If you forget that, I'll have to . . ." Gerald was about to say "find

a new girlfriend,” but as a former husband of twenty years, even to a brazen taskmaster like Morcilla, and a boss to innumerable thin-skinned pantywaists, he knew the consequences of such an offhand remark could have long-term, problematic implications, so he said, “. . . spank you with a cocktail onion.” No, it didn’t make much sense, but he was happy to have dodged a bullet rather than serve up the volatile alternative, even if it made him appear slow-witted.

“That sounds kinky,” laughed Wren. Then she noticed the lavender suit and recalled what Sinisa told her about the man at the Borgata: he wore a purple outfit. She kept a smile on her face. “Gerald, I know this sounds weird, but do you know someone named Gerasik or Geraysik, or something like that?”

“You mean like the dinosaur movie?” He tried to make light of the question. “No, never met anyone with a name like that. Why do you ask?” Gerald struggled not to swallow or avert his eyes guiltily.

“I don’t know. I thought you might know him, but if you don’t, you don’t.”

“Wren, I know a lot of people – some good, some bad. Would it make a difference if I knew him?”

“Not really.”

“Then, I don’t know him. Who is he?”

The ferry master blasted the horn, and in another minute he maneuvered the huge orange ship into the dock on Staten Island as if he were parking a Fiat Uno. Wren gave Gerald a long, deep kiss, tears streaming down her face, and in a barely audible voice, she said, “I adore you, Gerald.” Then she walked down the gangplank into the terminal where she immediately reboarded the same boat for the return trip to Manhattan. From there, she would take Amtrak 239 to Dutchess County, then proceed to parts north and west beyond. Gerald stayed behind on Staten Island to kill time. He decided to

visit the St. Clare's Parish Center, the interior of which was awarded a citation of merit from the American Institute of Architecture. The amorphous walls and wavy ceilings, the irregularly spaced polygonal windows, the funhouse hallways, and the entry foyer that looked like it was scavenged from the set of *Coma* – together these disorienting features conspired to depress Gerald enormously and overwhelm his senses. He felt as though he had been transported back in time, to childhood, to that awful amusement park with its devilish Tilt-a-Whirl and its despicable, rusty-cabled “Vomit Comet.”

Back on the ferry *John Noble*, as the sun set behind the Statue of Liberty, Gerald stood alone on the aft deck smoking a cigarette for the first time in fifteen years, and silently cried in the company of seagulls. In his depressed state he knew the next few weeks and months would become his personal season in hell. A verse came to mind, something he recalled from the Rimbaud/Mapplethorpe portfolios in Arbogast's collection: “My poor heart dribbles at the stern, my heart covered with caporal. O abracadantic waves, take my heart that it may be cleansed.”

The funeral service for Morcilla drew nearly five hundred mourners to St. Patrick's Cathedral in midtown Manhattan. Her obituary had taken up half a page near the back of the A section of the New York Times and included a flattering photograph taken twelve years earlier, just prior to the first appearance of facial sagging. Her death did not however merit a citation on the front page as was done sometimes for Society people of note.

The chairpersons of several New York City charities and museums, with whom Morcilla collaborated to raise funds and guide policy, took to the lectern to offer heartfelt eulogies. Also in attendance to pay their respects were a deputy mayor, the representative for the Fourteenth Congressional district, the director of the Department of Cultural Affairs, and some mid-level city and state politicians to whose election campaigns Morcilla contributed handsomely. Reporters from the New York Times, the Village Voice and the NY Post showed up. Having published an embarrassing picture of Chappy Hardwick retching onto Morcilla's piano, the editor of Page Six dispatched a photographer to take snaps of some of the flakier artists who were expected to attend. Her brother and sister, whom Morcilla hadn't seen for more than five years, flew in from LA and Maastricht respectively; a few family friends and distant relatives from Spain, Florida and Pennsylvania also made the trip. Wearing a black Prada suit, black satin tie and dark rectangular sunglasses, Gerald sat with his mother in the front row along with David Arbogast and some business associates. Vicki was there with her husband Sherwood who still couldn't understand the depth

of his wife's grief since Morcilla's tragic death – behavior he considered over the top. He never suspected for a moment that Morcilla and his wife were lovers.

Richard Curtain attended with his son Howard and Howard's third wife, Fawn, a delicious morsel who walked the runways for Calvin Klein and Donna Karan. Seated next to Fawn was Chappy Hardwick, dressed in a foppish waist-coat and sporting a cravat, accompanied by his new boyfriend, Lucius – a Joe Dallesandro look-alike from the actor's *Trash* days. For now, Chappy was through with twinks.

Gerald and Morcilla did not have an extensive family circle. No children, one living parent between them, Morcilla's two estranged siblings, Carmie and Jeff, who long ago moved far from their big sister after their parents died in a car crash in the SS36 tunnel between Lecco and Bellano, leaving behind a morass of financial loose ends which Morcilla mostly tied up in her favor, including wresting sole ownership of Casa Calatrava. Had Morcilla not cultivated such a broad set of relationships through her philanthropic and curatorial work, the funeral could have taken place in the cathedral's apse.

When it was almost over, Vicki pulled Gerald aside to express her personal condolences and then, in a hushed voice, announced, "Morcilla told me she thought you might be having an affair with a man. I hope that's not true, Gerald." Gerald was truly shocked at the comment and could do nothing more than turn and walk away. Vicki called to him in the near empty cathedral, her words echoing in the massive chamber, "Why did you change your hairstyle, Gerald?"

The whole affair sucked the energy right out of Gerald. The added stress of the still-open Oscar Dupree investigation trammled upon Gerald's immune system and he acquired a lung infection that sent him to bed for a week. He used the time to analyze and re-analyze the

elements of his plan for flaws. He was fairly certain some existed, but were there any so egregious as to bring him down? Might Oscar have left behind a diary describing conversations with Gerald about killing “Worm?” If Detective Dunn pulled on a tiny thread might he unravel the entire garment? Bedridden, unable to do anything that might take his mind off the investigations, Gerald was doomed to obsess over the many potential outcomes that awaited him. He thought he was going crazy. He wanted badly to talk to Wren, to hear her voice and seek comfort, but more importantly to ensure she was staying on point.

While he was sweating it out in muggy New York City, coughing up green phlegm and losing weight, Wren was enjoying the fresh air and pleasant sunshine in the Catskills. Gerald questioned whether he might have imparted too much Machiavelli on Wren. How good it is for a prince, wrote Nicolo, “to appear merciful, faithful, humane, religious, upright, and to be so, but with a mind so framed that should he require not to be so, he may be able and know how to change to the opposite.” Would Wren, separated from Gerald, influenced perhaps by new friends or a nascent love interest closer to her own age, change to the opposite? He couldn’t find out right now. Contacting Wren was out of the question, contrary to his plan – and once set, Gerald always adhered to his plans.

At home convalescing Gerald was informed by Norma the maid that an assistant of a Detective Dunn had called to request that he come to the station tomorrow. Gerald was in the bathroom playing “Find the Fossil” in between periods of intensive vomiting. He was too fatigued to chasten Norma for another one of her intrusions on his bathroom privacy. The next morning, still weak and phlegmy Gerald put on a summery Brioni jacket and linen slacks combo and directed Mustapha to drive him to the Thirteenth Precinct where he

learned from Dunn that the Dupree case had been closed officially as a suicide. All the evidence suggested it; nothing had been uncovered to contradict it. Dunn indicated that the search of Pfalzgraf Associates' computers turned up nothing of interest and that the police would be releasing the equipment. Dunn stepped closer to Gerald and said, "I shouldn't be telling you this Mr. Pfalzgraf, but your buddy Oscar was found guilty of feeling up girls in the subway when he was a minor. It's not in the public records, but I wanted you to know he exhibited some sexual deviancy as a youth."

"He's not – he wasn't – my 'buddy,' Detective, but thanks for the information. What happens now?"

"We found a next of kin in Plano, Illinois – a half-brother named Farnsworth, or some such hifalutin name, who agreed to pay the freight to have the body shipped out west."

Gerald wondered – *could it be? Maybe.*

Dunn pressed on. He reported, as though he knew something about technology which he certainly did not, "The IT guys used an NSA-level disk wiping algorithm to eliminate the pornography from your database." Sensing no admiration from Gerald for his use of a technical acronym, Dunn continued, "Mr. Pfalzgraf, if you ever have this kind of problem with an employee in the future, please contact the authorities immediately. Don't try to protect someone of this ilk. In my many years of experience, I've learned these perverts cannot control themselves. I've seen how they hoard this filthy material, even when they think they're about to be caught. By protecting them, you're ultimately complicit in the crimes they commit. Understand?"

Gerald looked like he was listening intently, but he was in a state of euphoria over the announcement that the case was closed, and barely heard a word the detective said. He nodded at the appropriate times,

a skill acquired and honed by many men in the course of playing their roles of husbands and fathers.

"I understand, Detective."

Dunn hesitated as though he remained unsure, unsatisfied. "Are you seeing anyone now? Socially, or otherwise? Romantically, maybe?"

Gerald had just about enough of the esteemed Detective Dunn and his prying questions so instead of staying cool he responded, "My wife is dead. I'm grieving. Have you ever heard of something called the 'grief process'?"

"Yes, I have." Dunn still seemed to be waiting for an answer to his original question.

After a delay in the verbal game of chicken, Gerald capitulated. "No, I am not seeing anyone now, if that's any concern of yours."

Dunn squished a pimple on his neck, wiped the tiny amount of blood and pus on the seat of his pants, and nodded. The sense Gerald got was that the Detective would take his word for it . . . now. But he was not thoroughly convinced. He feared Dunn may open a file called "Pfalzgraf's Prevarications" and begin an effort to fill it up.

"I must say, Mr. Pfalzgraf, I was rather hoping we would find a more compelling reason behind the suicide of Mr. Dumphy . . ."

"Dupree."

"Right. A more compelling reason than just some basic boring troubles at work. But that's just me." Dunn looked off into the distance for a second, then turned to look directly into Gerald's eyes. He grinned and said, "The secret of life is to appreciate the pleasure of being terribly, terribly deceived – do you know what I mean?"

"Umm . . . not really. Is that another quote?"

"Oscar Wilde – *A Woman of No Importance*. Gee, I really had you pegged for the type of person who would be familiar with his work."

Gerald didn't know how to respond so he tried to maintain a

neutral expression. Appearing alarmed, curious, confused, amused, insulted – any reaction in response to Dunn’s strange and seemingly inappropriate recitations of Wilde’s passages might constitute a tip visible only to the seasoned detective, like a gambler’s tell.

“I’m sorry to disappoint. Anyway, thank you for your efforts, Detective Dunn.” When Dunn extended his hand, Gerald shoved his into his pockets. The two walked to the door where an officer buzzed Gerald out. Back on the sidewalk Gerald told Mustapha to drive the limo to the garage and go home early. He would be walking to the office – had a lot of work to catch up on, and he was feeling better than he had in a month.

IF YOU LIKE ICE CREAM, WHY STOP AT ONE SCOOP? HAVE TWO,
HAVE THREE. TOO MUCH IS NEVER ENOUGH.

Morris Lapidus

Gerald was nervous with anticipation. He was back in DUMBO for the first time since launching his plan several months earlier, preparing to call Wren for the first time since she left the City for horsy upstate New York. He had to find a new pay phone. The one he used previously to make his untraceable calls had been removed, leaving just a tiny square modular jack protruding like a nipple inside the hooded enclosure. Gerald felt slightly sad over the demise of the pay phone – an extinction that a generation ago would have been unthinkable, and one that would herald the end of anonymity in a world where avoiding the omniscient eye of government and corporate surveillance had become increasingly untenable.

Wren's cell phone rang a few times before she answered, and when she did Gerald heard in the background the muffled sounds of adults talking and laughing, and of dishes and glasses clinking. "Wren? Is that you?"

"Gerald? Oh my God! I'm so happy to hear your voice. Where are you?"

"In the City. I'm missing you so much you can't begin to believe it. What's all that noise?"

"I'm in a restaurant. I took a second job, Ger. I'm waitressing, and doing some bartending too. I had to. Y'know, I ran through all those dopey gift cards in a couple of months."

She spent \$20,000 in two months? In that dinky town? "Are you still working for the horse show company, too?"

"Yeah. What nice people. I'm so much happier here than I was in

that god-awful apartment in New York. When am I going to see you? Is everything OK now?"

Gerald didn't particularly care for the notion that Wren might be happier away from Manhattan, the center of the universe and the place where any future Mrs. Gerald Pfalzgraf must live and love.

"Everything's great. When can you get away from the stables and tables, and come visit me?"

Wren reviewed the next seven days of her calendar which seemed more constipated than Gerald's. They decided to meet in Manhattan on Tuesday, her day off. Gerald met Wren at Penn Station where Amtrak 234 arrived ahead of schedule, only forty-five minutes late. The couple spent most of the day catching up on what each other had been doing over the past six months. After a stroll in Central Park they went to lunch at Tao off Madison Avenue. Usually, Gerald preferred to dine at small intimate places, away from boisterous diners, incognito. This was not one of those times. Perhaps subconsciously he sought an antidote in the grandiosity of Tao and of all things Manhattan to contravene Wren's new-found attraction to small-scale exurban living.

Wren spoke about her fondness for the horses and the show people, and again of being a bit perturbed about having to live off the pre-paid gift-cards. She told Gerald how much she missed him and how much she was looking forward to resuming their relationship after the six month hiatus. She again extended her condolences to Gerald for the loss of Morcilla – a strange moment indeed. Although sincere in her sentiment, Wren had to pretend she wasn't elated over the turn of events precipitated by the bizarre demise of Gerald's wife and her own scourge, Sinisa. And Gerald had to pretend again that the sniper shooting and the staircase tumble were shocking yet fortuitous events for the two lovers.

After a moment of silence during which time Gerald took a few

sips from his cup of sake' while staring at the huge smiling Buddha situated at the far end of the warehouse-sized restaurant, he changed the conversation to less emotional subject matter. He was happy to report that his company was doing quite well. Pfalzgraf Associates broke ground on the Arbogast museum, and the spec house outside of Philadelphia was more than half complete. He had been approached by *Architectural Digest* about a photo shoot of the construction phase of the museum – not for the cover, but something substantial inside the magazine anyway. Wren was excited to hear that Pfalzgraf Associates would be undertaking a project in historic Charleston, although she found it difficult to envision an International Style building co-existing peacefully with the neighboring buildings from centuries past.

Gerald also mentioned that Richard Curtain had died in Cote d'Ivoire while on a sailing expedition to Africa, and that a month later his son, Howard, was indicted for his role, along with a mid-level administrator with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in a scheme involving bribery and other chicanery to lock up exclusive rights to develop a casino on Honniasont Indian land. Apparently Oscar was an even bigger jerk than Gerald imagined – his deceased employee had passed on the phony "Indian tribe" plans to the competition after all; plans that Gerald had given exclusively to Oscar as a test of his fidelity. Gerald found it extremely satisfying to learn his nemesis Howard Curtain had taken the bait and tumbled like a crooked politician. The local papers noted that "Honniasont" is an Iroquois Indian term meaning "wearing something round the neck," and more than a few articles lamely suggested that Howard Curtain may wind up in that position should he be found guilty of the charges. Gerald was becoming a bit animated about the downward spiral of his arch-competitor when he noticed Wren didn't seem to be sharing in his schadenfreude.

“Ger,” she said softly when he stopped talking, “let’s make love. Long, slow love.”

Gerald had booked Suite 2706 in the Warwick Hotel, formerly Cary Grant’s residence for twelve years. On several occasions while drinking Gibson’s at Public Hair, Gerald expounded on the genius, panache and elegance of the former Archie Leach, encouraging Wren to examine all the films in his vast body of work. She favored Grant’s comic side: *His Girl Friday*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and even his breezy performance in the thriller *Charade*.

Within moments of arriving at the Warwick, Wren and Gerald were alone together in their suite, together for the first time in months, acting as though they were together for the first time in their lives. And they stayed in Cary Grant’s former suite for three days straight, behaving like the newlyweds they would become in less than a year.

Gerald rented a house in a small village on the shores of the Hudson River, about a mile from the apartment where Wren lived while she worked for the horse show organizers and tended bar in a passable restaurant designated “upscale” by a local magazine but unworthy of even one star from the New York Times. Almost every weekend Gerald traveled upstate from the City, sometimes driving the repaired Ferrari Spider, to spend time with Wren and to develop an *ab initio* relationship that their friends, relatives and professional colleagues would perceive to be brand new. Gerald carefully and methodically introduced Wren to his circle of people, as did Wren with Gerald. At the Pfalzgraf Associates company Christmas party at Le Bernardin, Wren got on famously with the staff and architects. Before the evening wrapped up at Guastavino’s, an elegant hall located beneath the Queensboro Bridge and a New York City landmark noted for its vaulted tiled interior designed by Barcelona-native Rafael Guastavino, people were making wagers whether Gerald would marry Wren before June.

The trial of Boy Crowder began in the spring. The media were out in full force, lathered up to make a spectacle of the quest for justice for the “I80 Inbreed.” Crowder’s court appointed counsel asked for a change of venue, and was denied. He wasn’t very successful either on getting his way with the judge during jury selection. Crowder himself had made a stink during his arraignment when his attorney entered a plea of “not guilty,” threatening to dismiss him until the judge gaveled him into silence. “Don’t be a schmuck, Mr. Crowder,” admonished

the judge. Boy Crowder instantly shut his mouth; he had never heard a Yiddish word before in his life.

The Warren County district attorney prosecuted the case personally, as it was an election year. Given that Crowder had been indisputably connected by hard evidence to the shootings on the second day, and given he had confessed very publicly to doing all the shooting over the two days, the prosecution was handed a fairly easy course of action. The serious charges were the killings of Morcilla Pfalzgraf and the driver of the SUV on the first day. The defense attorney tried to cast doubt that Crowder had the skill to make such accurate shots from a distance of hundreds of yards from the bluff, but he understood that proving the existence of an inability can be difficult. The type of ammunition used by both Tom Stull and Boy Crowder were similar, but no one knew that at the time for no rifle rounds had yet been recovered from the crime scene; the defense lawyer, intimidated by the DA and his vast resources, didn't pursue a concerted effort to seek out such evidence.

Gerald felt it necessary to attend the multi-day trial; had he skipped most or all of it, he may have invited unwanted questions and media scrutiny over his lack of interest. To these people, lack of interest means complicity – that was clear from the one and only time Gerald watched the arrogant and grating Nancy Grace perform on TV. After the trial ended quickly in Crowder's guilt on all charges, Gerald was offered the opportunity to make a victim's impact statement at the sentencing hearing. Again, not to participate could be construed negatively, so he composed a moving testimonial to his late wife. He was surprised how easily he found it to write positively about Morcilla, and as he did so he had a moment of true remorse. Gerald told the rapt audience how losing her after twenty years of marriage was devastating. He cited the names of the numerous organizations championing worthy causes that had come to depend upon her help in raising funds, and how they

and their constituents would suffer as well. Gerald said that he hoped someday he could forgive Crowder, but that day was not today. The speech struck a smart balance of sorrow, loss, anger, satisfaction with the verdict, and held out the potential of redemption.

Crowder was sentenced to two consecutive life terms without the possibility of parole and fined \$250,000. Two weeks later, Gerald and Wren left the port of New York City on the *Queen Mary 2*, the start of a two-month honeymoon that would take them to the Western hemisphere's most romantic cities in more than twenty countries, and offer them a chance to enjoy many of the world's exceptional architectural gems. Dedicating two months for the honeymoon allowed the couple to travel at a pace that was unrushed and never intrusive. At each stop, they exhibited their uncanny ability to appear to be locals, or at least long-term expatriates. At no time before in their lives had the two newlyweds been as happy as they were right now.

Upon arriving back at their home on Fifth Avenue, Wren did a bit of unpacking while Gerald checked phone messages. The last message was from an assistant DA of Warren County. She wanted Gerald to know that a professor at Seton Hall Law School had taken up the case of Boy Crowder as a project with some of his students, and that the ACLU would be funding an appeal of Crowder's conviction for the two murders. The assistant DA wanted Gerald to hear it first from her, and not from a newspaper reporter. "If you have any questions, please call me when you get back in town, Mr. Pfalzgraf."

Two months in the hard cell of East Jersey State Prison serving not one but two life sentences, all his beloved media attention snuffed out, the I80 Inbreed had a change of heart. He was now trying to recant his confession. The Seton Hall professor charged gross negligence on the part of Crowder's court appointed counsel, particularly for his lack of

motivation to seek ballistic evidence. Crowder's family hired a private investigator to pursue the theory of a second sniper after an intact spent rifle round was found inside a washing machine headed for a Wal-Mart store in Connecticut, and a twisted, deformed round was discovered inside a piece of luggage by an elderly woman who rode the bus to Atlantic City. Some Seton Hall students would be assigned the thankless job of determining who might have been near the site of the shooting that day and who also possessed exceptional shooting abilities.

Gerald erased the message and walked into the spacious living room where Wren had a Gibson waiting for him on the new Marc Newsom coffee table. Wren stood on the balcony overlooking Central Park in full summer bloom. In profile, her jaw was perfect.

Gerald smiled and took a sip of the fragrant cocktail, and asked himself – *what would a Prince do now?*

All Gerald Pfalzgraf wanted was to be adored. That, and to possess all of his wife Morcilla's vast fortune. Was that too much to ask for?

The founder of Pfalzgraf Associates, an exclusive Manhattan architecture firm catering to elite, wealthy clients, Gerald resents his wife's assertion that her financial support is fundamental to the firm's success – not because it's false, but because it's mostly true.

Gerald has come to resent a lot of things over the course of twenty long years of marriage to Morcilla.

He meets Wren, a beautiful, vivacious goddess half his age. Her jaw is perfect. He resolves to be with her. After obstacles to his happiness begin to pile up, Gerald tries his hand at architecting something different – a complex enterprise of mayhem. Guided by Machiavelli, his childhood hero, Gerald wields the tools of deception, manipulation and opportunism; he knows that men who seek to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived.

Architect's Rendition, Herb Schultz's second novel, tells the story of an amoral man who tries to secure the life he always wanted to live by cutting a swath through a cast of misfit characters – the kind who allow themselves to be deceived.



Herb Schultz is a graduate of Gannon University and Syracuse University, and has spent over 30 years in the technology industry specializing in supercomputing. He lives in Saugerties, New York and is the author of the novel *Ronnie and Lennie*.

Author, Herb Schultz

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