

DOUBLE BLIND TEST



A NOVEL BY
HERB SCHULTZ

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CHAPTER ONE

“This will serve as the final boarding call for Delta flight 701, nonstop to Los Angeles, departing at seven o’clock from Gate B20. All ticketed passengers should proceed at once to the gate.” The gate agent who had just made the announcement, a short, sturdy black woman outfitted in a jaunty Delta-issued uniform, stood like a sentry behind the bulky counter and scanned the floor for any remaining stragglers. Milling around the counter: a few worried-looking loners waiting on standby, their growing desperation palpable. To the right: a couple passengers waiting to board at the last minute – the types who like to savor the openness of the terminal for as long as possible before climbing into the claustrophobic confines of a stingy airplane seat. The gate agent purposely looked past one specific customer, refusing to make eye contact with her. As soon as the gate agent removed her thumb from the button on the intercom microphone, that customer, Tracy Shepard, tore into her once again.

“You’ve got to let me on that flight. It’s absolutely imperative I get to LA by noon to resolve a significant dispute between two

major, major corporations. Even someone in your position should be able to understand the importance of that.” Under normal circumstances Tracy would never have resorted to insulting a low-level, rank-and-file, unionized customer service representative. Such entrenched personnel, their skins thickened by repeated abuse to that of rhinoceros hide, never responded favorably. It was axiomatic. Exploding in a righteous rage might feel good for a moment, but it only pushes the desired outcome farther out of reach, just as struggling in quicksand accelerates the trip to the bottom. Tracy understood that better than anyone else, for she was a professional mediator, expert in the art of negotiation, and well-paid by parties from all over the world – Fortune 500 companies, celebrities, wealthy families – locked in disagreement, burning cash on futile litigation, seeking another way out.

After making a poor deal with a fellow student when she was 14, young, precocious Tracy memorized all the admonitions in Gordon Rule’s seminal book, *The Art of Negotiation*, one of 3,000 volumes on the shelves of her parents’ vast personal library. Adhering to the wisdom dispensed in the slim volume had served her well. Yet today, anxious about missing the flight, Tracy found herself violating one of the book’s first principles: “Don’t treat or talk to persons across the table as though they were inferior.” Obviously a terrible negotiating tactic. Nevertheless, she felt compelled to treat the recalcitrant gate agent as an inferior for one simple reason: it galled Tracy to no end that after 30 minutes of employing her best negotiation skills on this simple-minded woman, she had made precisely zero progress toward securing a seat on the plane – the plane visible through the big plate

glass window. The plane that would depart the gate in minutes. Oh, so tantalizingly close. It was her only hope of traversing the country in time for the big meeting in Los Angeles.

So, with nothing left to lose Tracy tossed aside the established negotiation techniques of genteel persuasion and tried the high-pressure low road instead. The gate agent didn't bother sneering or losing her temper or responding with a remark of equal and opposite derision. She knew she was in charge of the situation. Gate B20 was her domain, her fortress forming a Maginot Line in solidarity with the other gates in the B concourse. And no pushy broad dressed in a corporate-black Armani suit and Christian Louboutin shoes toting a designer briefcase that cost more than a gate agent makes in a month was going to get on that plane. Not no way, not no how. The agent simply uttered, "Impossible."

"Don't tell me it's impossible! Nothing's impossible! I know you're deadheading at least one stewardess. Give me her seat and send her on the next flight."

"We don't call them 'stewardesses' anymore. They're 'flight attendants' now. Even someone in your position should know that." Steaming, Tracy half-seriously considered hurling one of her Louboutins at the agent's head when a casually-dressed man in his late-forties stepped forward and made an offer. He was one of the stragglers waiting to board at the last minute.

"I'm sorry to butt in, but I couldn't help overhearing your predicament, ma'am. I'd be happy to trade my seat to you for one on the next flight. I'm in no hurry." Tracy's initial reaction was to recoil the way a mistrusting woman does when a smelly, grungy bagman confronts her from out of the shadows, only to feel chastened moments later when instead of leering lewdly or panhandling for some coins the bagman points out helpfully

that the woman's purse is hanging open – *wouldn't wanna see you get mugged, Miss.*

Tracy turned away from the gate agent and toward her savior. With the added height of her heels, Tracy towered over the man. She responded graciously, "That's very generous of you sir, but I wouldn't want you to miss your flight." Tracy turned up the charm to ensure the man realized that no matter what she might imply to the contrary, she intended to accept his offer. The gate agent stepped from behind her fortress and shook her head in resignation. She had seen it so many times before: rich, arrogant white people always get their way in the end.

Forty five-year-old Tracy was a successful, well-traveled, highly-paid mediation professional – a top independent provider of alternative dispute resolution. This morning she was due in Los Angeles to help two high-tech companies resolve a festering dispute exacerbated by questionable business tactics on the part of both sides. Never married, Tracy worked non-stop, jumping from one dispute to another, conducting research, understanding the needs and desires of her clients, twisting the arms of the pliant, psyching out the minds of the powerful. Over many years, she established a superb reputation for success and client satisfaction, and collected handsome fees that allowed her to live prosperously.

Tracy looked 45 in a good way – trim and fit, excellent taste in clothing, and blessed with a striking face that was lined just ever-so-slightly with character and sexy sophistication. The nature of her work compelled her to present a conservative, professional image – medium-length auburn hair coifed into a tidy bun, defensively dark designer power suits, intimidating rectangular

Robert Marc eyeglasses. Her one style conceit: showing off her long, shapely legs and sexy feet which she shod in expensive, stylish, ultrahigh-heeled shoes.

Fischer Cuttbate responded, "It really is no trouble, ma'am ..."

"Tracy. Please, call me Tracy."

"OK. Tracy. I'm very familiar with deadlines and corporate commitments and such. Don't think twice about it. Take my place."

Tracy hated for asking. "Are you sitting in ... coach?" She uttered the word "coach" as if she were inquiring about Ebola.

"Oh, no. I can't fly in coach. I've got a seat in row 2. I hope the window won't be a problem. If it is, I'm sure someone will swap with you once you're on board."

"I can't thank you enough, Mr...."

"Cuttbate, Fischer Cuttbate. Call me Fish."

"Really?" *Fish? Seriously?* "I mean, thank you so much ... Fish." Tracy turned toward the gate agent with muted superiority, expecting some contrived grief conjured at the last moment by the outflanked agent. Instead she received a valid boarding pass for Delta flight 701. The agent had already printed the pass for the tall bitch dressed in black Armani because she knew from experience: rich, arrogant white people always get their way in the end.

Tracy Shepard was the last person to board the plane; as soon as she walked onto the jet, the flight attendant, a woman old enough to have once been called a stewardess before it became a pejorative, pulled the door shut, turned the locking mechanism, and began to explain for a very tough audience the intricacies of buckling and unbuckling a seatbelt.

Fischer Cuttbate strolled casually from the B20 gate area directly for a barstool in the ersatz Irish pub in the airport terminal where the bartender served shots and beers at 6:55 a.m. to nervous travelers and hardened alcoholics. Before ordering a Wild Turkey and a side of crispy bacon he placed a call to a colleague on the West Coast. Even though it was just shy of 4 a.m. in Los Angeles, the colleague would take the call – in Fischer’s line of work, time of day was never a barrier to conducting business. After he hung up, satisfied that everything was in place, Fischer spread out the *NY Daily News* on the bar top and got comfortable on the stool, for he had no intention of flying today.

CHAPTER TWO

Tracy Shepard was the only daughter of Dr. Charles Shepard, a professor of physics at Columbia University and the former Dorothy Grimm, a college-educated housewife who chose to stay at home and raise young Tracy in the family's comfortable apartment in Morningside Heights, a short walk from Professor Shepard's office in Pupin Hall. Tracy was a bright child who at an early age exhibited a keen aptitude for inventing games, solving puzzles and working her father's slide rule. When she was four, her reading comprehension was measured at the seventh grade level. Her father taught her about the wondrous theories, discoveries and inventions of Archimedes, Newton, Bernoulli, Oppenheimer and the Curies. And not just formulas and equations, but also the lives and times of the famous personalities of physics, and how

their relationships with man and nature shaped their thinking. Dorothy offered instruction in literature, poetry, drama and cinema, nicely balancing with the humanities Charles's enthusiasm for the scientific. As Tracy approached the age of five, Professor Shepard exercised his influence within the academic community to get his daughter accepted into the exclusive Dalton School. Twelve years later, thanks to her diligent work ethic and superior intellect, Tracy graduated Summa Cum Laude and delivered the valedictory address. Charles Shepard had allotted a significant portion of his modest salary to fund his daughter's exemplary primary school career, content in the knowledge that his tenure at Columbia University would be rewarded later with handsome discounts on college tuition when the time came for Tracy to attend there.

A seminal event in Tracy's life occurred when she was a high-school sophomore – an event that put her on the path to becoming a superstar mediator. Increasingly attracted to alternative rock and roll, particularly the Glitter scene popularized by Marc Bolan, Lou Reed, Roxy Music and the New York Dolls, Tracy begged for her parents' permission to attend a David Bowie concert at Madison Square Garden. The semester at Dalton was almost over and Tracy was on track to bring home another in an unbroken series of straight-A report cards. Charles was entirely opposed to the idea: "This Bowie guy strikes me as a deviant sort who'll attract a sketchy element to his show, maybe even homosexuals." Dorothy was less concerned, but she too hoped her daughter, whom she and her husband had kept fairly well-insulated from the wilds of New York City, would, in the end, skip the concert. As an only child, Tracy was not particularly adept at sharing with others, nor did she acquire

much of a tolerance for not getting her way. Not that her parents obliged her every whim, but without a sibling to compete for attention and familial resources, Tracy's needs and desires, never too outrageous or beyond the capability of her parents to satisfy, rarely went unsatisfied. Rather than forbid her outright, Dorothy granted permission on the condition that Tracy procure a ticket with her own money. Tracy exclaimed energetically, "Thanks, Mom – you're the best," unaware that Dorothy had already called the Garden and learned the show was sold out. When Tracy discovered the same thing later in the afternoon she was disappointed, but not discouraged. At school the next day Tracy made a deal with Carol, a fellow student in danger of failing American History. In exchange for a Bowie ticket in Carol's possession, Tracy impetuously agreed to ghost-write a term paper on the subject of Reconstruction – an assignment due in two weeks, and one that Carol had not even begun to research. It was Tracy's first foray into negotiating.

Dorothy was surprised – but not too much, for her daughter was resourceful – when Tracy rushed into the apartment after school waving the Bowie concert ticket and dancing about the living room, triumphant in her acquisition of the scarce commodity. She went to her room and blasted "Diamond Dogs" on her stereo record player. It had been so easy – one minute Tracy was destined to miss the concert, the next minute she held a ticket to see Ziggy Stardust *him* – *her?* – self. She imagined singing along to every Bowie song, and if she were very lucky, catching a drum stick or guitar pick lobbed into the audience at the end of the show.

On the day of the concert Charles insisted on escorting Tracy to Madison Square Garden on the number 2 train. Unsettled

that his teenage daughter was going to attend a debauched rock concert in grimy Madison Square Garden, a sordid venue, Tracy's father put his foot down when she mentioned she would be riding the subway by herself. Tracy appreciated her father's concern for her safety and well-being, but she refused to sit next to him on the subway. She had dyed her hair green, painted a silver circle on her forehead, and wore dangerously-high platform shoes with three-inch-thick soles, whereas her father looked like Ozzie Nelson in his dorky, horn-rimmed glasses and tweed jacket with leather ovals stitched on the elbows. The two looked almost as incongruous together as Wilbur Mills, the alcohol-addled septuagenarian congressman, and his flaming Argentine mistress Fanne Foxe after she climbed out of the Tidal Basin. The professor shook his head in disapproval and obvious disgust as more and more outlandish-looking Bowie fans boarded the train at each stop. After arriving at the Garden, Tracy rushed ahead to the gate leaving her father far enough behind so that none of the glamorous concert-goers might associate her with him. Charles hung out for the duration of the show at a loud, smoky restaurant in the bowels of Penn Station, drinking lemonade, eating keg-shaped pretzels and reading the latest issue of *The Journal of Applied Physics*.

Unfamiliar with the environs of Madison Square Garden, Tracy was extremely disappointed to discover her seat was located in the far upper tier at the back of the arena. Prior to the show she had fashioned an image in her mind of standing mere feet from the stage. Tracy was so far from the stage that when the drummer struck his cymbals the sound of the clash arrived a good second after the fact. For all intents and purposes the entertainers on stage could have been Broadway understudies

lip-synching “Soul Love,” “The Jean Genie,” and “Rebel Rebel.” And the kids sitting nearby taunted Tracy when she turned down their offer to smoke some weed and pop some ludes, challenging her commitment to the parameters of the scene. Tracy had gone to the show expecting a sincere sensation, but left disillusioned.

On the way back home, Tracy was sullen. Charles could tell something was wrong. For one thing, the silver circle was no longer painted on her forehead, and for another, she sat next to him on the return ride. He began to suspect his smothering oversight had soured his daughter’s big night out, so he launched into a series of questions, hoping to ignite a conversation the way parents do when the deafening silence of their children goes from being merely annoying to clinically disturbing.

“How was the concert, dear?”

“Fine.”

“Did you see any of your friends there?”

“No.”

“Did you like the music?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you have a good time?”

“Sure.”

Each one-word answer was delivered completely bereft of human emotion. The buzz around the show was exciting but the piss-poor location and the ill-mannered seat mates diminished the experience – and now Tracy faced the unwelcome task of writing a fully-annotated term paper, due in ten days, for her friend Carol. Exhausted and down, Tracy fell into bed, platform shoes and all.

After dinner the next evening, as she and her mother washed dishes, Tracy reluctantly confessed her predicament.

Dorothy stated bluntly that Tracy had been stupid – not so much for making a deal, but for making a patently poor one. “You don’t get what you deserve in this world, Tracy Rae, you get what you negotiate. Instead of trading a term paper for the ticket, you should have countered with an offer of something of lesser value, like helping Carol with her math homework.” Tracy was surprised at her mother’s attitude. She assumed Mom would be angry or disappointed with her for entering into a compact to help another student essentially cheat on a term paper. Tracy asked, “How can I learn more about negotiating?” Tracy’s mother dried her hands and walked to the living room where she searched through the section of the family library containing volumes on economics, accounting and business management. Unlike many home libraries that owners install merely to complement the décor of the room – vanity projects designed to suggest erudition, when in fact the meticulously-arranged books are never cracked open – the Shepard library was a hub of activity, a center of gravity in the household. As such, the books were scattered about the shelves, haphazardly arranged and stacked one atop the other in tall piles. “Where is that ... oh, here it is.” Dorothy stepped down gingerly from the oaken ladder and presented her daughter with the book that would become a formative element in her education and in her choice of career: *The Art of Negotiation* by Gordon Rule.

Three years later, better versed in the art of negotiation, senior class president Tracy Shepard was vying with another industrious Dalton student, Hannah Goldman, for two prestigious extracurricular leadership positions: editor of the yearbook and director of the school play. Possessing enormous drive, each

girl wished to take on both roles, securing two plum positions that would stand out handsomely on a transcript. The faculty advisors however leaned against assigning such a hefty workload to a single student. In a meeting with the girls to discuss the issue, the advisors were about to announce a unilateral decision when Tracy interrupted, suggesting they allow Hannah and her to talk between themselves and offer a joint proposal. *The Art of Negotiation* makes it plain: “Try to obtain and maintain the initiative at the conference table.”

Hannah looked at Tracy quizzically. The two advisors agreed to Tracy’s request and left the room. Alone with Hannah, Tracy respectfully asked, “Which position do you prefer?”

Hannah folded her arms and crossed her legs, dangling a shiny black patent leather shoe from her foot. The skirt of her plaid uniform was positioned well above her knee exposing a sexy morsel of leg between the top of her white stocking and the base of her hem. “I want them both, just like you do.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen. You know they’ll split the difference and assign you one position and me the other. Wouldn’t it be better, at least, to get the one we each want more?” Tracy repeated, “Which position do you prefer?” Tracy knew that Hannah was a theatrical sort and would likely go for the position of school play director – that’s why she offered the opening salvo to her.

A month earlier, in a conversation with her mother Tracy expressed her interest in competing for the two positions and expressed her concern that Hannah Goldman would fight her for them.

“What play is the school putting on this year?” asked Dorothy.

“*The Merchant of Venice*.”

Impressed, Dorothy replied, “Really? That’s a pretty demanding play.” Referring to Hannah’s mother, she added, “I’d be surprised, though, if Hadassah would allow Hannah to have any part of it. You know – the anti-Semitic undertones, Shylock, the pound of flesh, and all that. It’s not as outrageous as Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*, but directing *Merchant* could be a problem for Hannah.” A graduate of NYU with a Masters degree in English Literature, Dorothy was an aficionado of all sorts of material, especially the classics.

Tracy mumbled, “Hmm ... that’s interesting ...” She drifted off, tumbling deep into thought. She was unaware that a devilish grin had spread across her face. Expecting Tracy to respond with something more meaningful, Dorothy finally asked, “You’ve got that mischievous smile – what are you thinking about, Tracy Rae?”

Hannah said to Tracy “Well, if I could only lead one activity, I would pick the play, but ...”

Tracy cut her off, “That’s cool. I was going to say I’d pick the yearbook. How about this: you take the play and I’ll take the yearbook, then you choose me to be the assistant director and I’ll pick you for assistant editor.” Hannah looked at Tracy with suspicion, but Tracy maintained a neutral expression, carefully following Gordon Rule’s admonition: “Never permit yourself to get smug and feel that you have a point, a contract or an agreement in the bag.”

“Welllll ... I don’t know,” said Hannah with drawn-out skepticism, wondering whether she was being played. She shifted in her chair, dropping her sexy school-girl patent leather

shoe off her toes onto the parquet floor. Tracy remained poised. Finally, when Hannah concluded the offer was legitimate, she said, “OK, Tracy. Let’s do it that way.” Tracy smiled and called the faculty advisors back into the room; they happily approved the agreement and congratulated the two young women for the maturity of their Solomonic decision.

A week after Tracy began to organize the yearbook staff and Hannah started casting around for a Shylock, a Portia and an Antonio, Hannah tearfully met with her faculty advisor to tender her resignation as class play director. Just as Dorothy predicted, Hannah’s mother strictly forbade her to have anything to do with the production of Shakespeare’s tale of a tormented and unsympathetic Jewish money-lender. Tracy, the assistant director appointed by Hannah herself, stepped up to take over as the play’s director. And as the editor of the yearbook Tracy led the production of one of the highest quality publications in the school’s history. Tracy was pleased to discover that juggling the two extracurricular assignments hadn’t been as tough a challenge as she initially expected, thanks in part to having Hannah around to run mundane errands and deal with all the stultifying yearbook bureaucracy.

CHAPTER THREE

The weather in LA was picture perfect, and the air quality surprisingly good. A limo driver whisked Tracy from the airport directly to an office complex where she had reserved a private conference room. Tracy walked into the room exuding confidence, authority and a touch of glamour. Six months earlier *Forbes* magazine ran a brief, mostly-flattering story about hard-driving Tracy Shepard, mediation consultant, thought-leader and author of *Putting the Arb in Arbitration: Making it WORK for You!* The article recalled how she single-handedly mediated a resolution for two aggrieved Hollywood moguls engaged in a dispute fueled more on testosterone than fiscal due diligence. Through Tracy's efforts the moguls averted a nasty lawsuit that could have shelved production of a major motion picture postulating that Cain killed Abel in

self-defense. The *Forbes* writer noted that Ms. Shepard's mediation work over 30 days had earned her "upwards of six figures." He also referred to Tracy as the "Medea of Mediation" for her ability to get her way, a comparison she found borderline insulting. *Did that writer really perceive me as a jealous murderous type? Maybe he misunderstood – or never read – the ancient play, and was simply searching for a clever alliteration.*

Promptly at noon, Tracy kicked off the session by introducing herself to the principles in the dispute: NanoNano, a startup company producing ultra-tiny devices for uses in medicine, homeland security and military applications, and backed by hefty financing from a Silicon Valley venture capital firm; and PicoTech, a firm developing microscopic monitoring instruments.

The atmosphere in the room was toxic. The Senior Vice President of R&D for NanoNano refused to shake the extended hand of the CTO of PicoTech. A frequent witness to such childish behavior, Tracy resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Lately, the two companies had been trampling over each other's turf, competing more closely with one another for dominance in the rapidly-growing market for nanotechnology. PicoTech had recently completed a successful IPO and was now inflicting a shitload of pain on NanoNano: patent infringement claims, slime-marketing campaigns via phony Facebook and Twitter accounts, headhunting NanoNano's key personnel. Meanwhile, through questionable methods, NanoNano had come into possession of confidential documents that addressed environmental and safety violations at PicoTech – evidence of wrongdoing that NanoNano threatened to forward on to the *New York Times*, the

San Jose Mercury News, OSHA and the EPA.

Tracy called the meeting to order. Expecting each nanotechnology firm to launch into a lengthy preamble about how the other had breached the accepted norms of corporate behavior, and not wanting the meeting to derail immediately over petty accusations, Tracy projected on the wall a list of ground rules for communicating in the meeting. The rules seemed as though they had been transcribed from a sign at the playground – after all, hadn't it been argued that all anyone ever needed to know was learned in kindergarten? Tracy disallowed any statement not backed by facts, encouraged each side to view the dispute from the perspective of the other, and floated dozens of proposals. She meticulously documented every utterance: claims and counterclaims, half-hearted admissions, words that might be used to debunk denials that a statement had ever been uttered, anything that smelled of compromise. Using an elaborate discrete quantitative model, Tracy calculated the financial damage each company was inflicting on the other, and by extension, to themselves. The dollar figures constituted a harsh wake-up call for the representatives of NanoNano and PicoTech; more than anything, the numbers starkly made the case for wrapping up a resolution.

At the end of three grueling but ultimately successful days pushing and pulling the two sides toward resolution, Tracy summarized the details of the agreements and thanked all the participants for persevering. She encouraged both companies to conduct business with an eye on the marketplace landscape. To Tracy's surprise, the men in the conference room actually stood and applauded.

It hadn't been easy – it never was. The days were long,

tempers flared, threats were strewn about. Once or twice, physical violence seemed plausible. But from the start Tracy had always been highly confident that something in her toolbag of proposals would inexorably prevail in breaking the logjam between the recalcitrant parties. She was particularly glad she had hired that expert from the London School of Economics to develop the quantitative tool that put a dollar figure on obstinacy. Tracy knew that neither side really wanted to extend the acrimony, and that the executives desperately needed to report hopeful progress to their respective CEOs. Before the meeting, Tracy placed a courtesy call to the heads of both NanoNano and PicoTech to feel out their positions and assess their pliability. Both NanoNano and PicoTech were brand new companies with innovative business plans, and each was endowed with monstrous financial backing. The worldwide revenue opportunity in the nanotechnology segment was astronomical, certainly large enough to accommodate both firms comfortably. Tracy recognized the last thing these fiery firms wanted was to be bogged down in a legal quagmire, choking each other's throats, throwing mud and sinking deeper into quicksand while other startups zoomed past them to dominate the market. She had come up with a proposition whereby each side could declare victory – a beautiful thing to anyone involved in alternative dispute resolution. In the end the mediation concluded quickly and smoothly. Was it worth five figures? Tracy thought so – every day these two companies fought each other to a stalemate represented squandered opportunity to penetrate a multi-billion dollar market segment. Absent her involvement these clowns might have battled indefinitely, eliminating each other through mutually-assured destruction.

Tracy packed her papers and laptop into her designer briefcase and looked on in satisfaction as the executives of both companies laughed and shook hands; three days earlier no one would have predicted the festive outcome. Tracy likewise shook hands with all the attendees: the executives, their assistants, a couple of lawyers and a few financial wonks. At six-foot-one in her Christian Louboutin heels she was taller than all but one person: six-foot-seven Ron Subytic, a NanoNano staffer – a giant with huge hands and a face slightly deformed by what Tracy guessed was acromegaly. Not that he was ugly – on the contrary, he bore a passing resemblance to Tony Robbins, the self-help writer and telegenic TV personality. Still, Ron Subytic exuded a creepiness that discomfited Tracy. His deep voice was almost demonic, like Lurch’s on *The Addams Family* – “You rannnggg?”

During her chauffeured ride back to the Peninsula Beverly Hills hotel, Tracy contemplated the quiet, sumptuous meal she would eat alone in her room. She savored the thought of enjoying a clarifying solitude away from the clamor of egotistical loudmouths, and yet she regretted having no love interest with whom to share the tales of her conquests, and the secrets of her haunting frailties. She slumped in the back seat of the limo. *Am I too preoccupied and too self-important to attract a soul mate? Have I purposely created a fortress out of preoccupied self-importance? Because maybe I’m afraid of being plundered? Shit!* Broaching the concept of being afraid, Tracy abruptly ceased what she believed to be a maudlin self-examination. *Fuck it – at least the pay is good.*

Room service delivered a rolling tray to Tracy’s luxurious suite on the top floor of the Peninsula. She feasted on crispy

black bass, braised celery and parsnip custard, and Iberico ham in a green peppercorn sauce paired with a tasty 2000 vintage Vina Ardanza rioja. When she couldn't eat another bite Tracy wandered downstairs and relaxed on a long, teak chaise by the pool under the cloudless night sky. Sitting nearby were Martin Scorsese, Paul Schrader and some agent types who appeared to be engaged in a conversation about a bright, new screenplay. It sounded as though they had a disagreement in search of mediation – she overheard one of them mention “cash-break zero” and “schedule F,” sure signs in the movie-making industry of financial trepidation. Tracy felt strangely drawn to the group, but resisted; she had expended enough energy over the past three days husbanding negotiations, starting with a dispute with an uppity gate agent who was determined, no doubt by racism, to bar her from boarding Delta flight 701. Tracy thought again about that slightly dumpy guy – *was he kidding when he said he wanted to be called 'Fish?'* – who gave up his seat for her. Tracy's professional instinct was to peg him for a chump, a fool for offering with no strings attached to part with something of value. It violated another of Gordon Rule's principles of negotiation: “Never make concessions to your opposition without getting something in return.” It didn't occur to her at first that Fischer Cuttbate might be a true gentleman, an exemplar of White Knight chivalry long thought to be extinct in the 21st century. At this stage in her life Tracy had completely given up on the notion of chivalry. Since starting her mediation firm after working for a few years in the Manhattan district attorney's office, Tracy had seen no pervasive evidence that it still existed. Indeed, all she ever encountered in her mediation sessions were pettiness, prevarication, pure arrogance and puerile behavior. The session

just completed with NanoNano and PicoTech was no different. Sometimes when she was thoroughly wearied, Tracy wondered if it wouldn't be more effective to instruct the men to put their dicks on the table and choose the winner with a ruler.

But after another poolside Champagne cocktail she began to reconsider. *Could this guy Fish be a White Knight in the classic sense – a man who doesn't expect an act of kindness to be reciprocated or compensated?* Tracy wanted badly to believe that White Knights still walked the earth. She knew they once existed, for her own father was one. Charles Shepard, a brilliant, sensitive intellectual had once been a beacon for Tracy, a mentor, a protector, a pillar of strength, a White Knight – especially after her mother died. But now the old man was unable to effectively wend his way through his own home. Hobbled by the ravages of retinitis pigmentosa, an insidious, progressive eye disease that inevitably leads to complete blindness, Tracy's father, an accomplished physicist and retired Columbia University professor beloved by many a student had been reduced to a doddering geezer.

Sipping her third Champagne cocktail, Tracy lounged by the pool and mulled over her next mediation engagement: a dispute between two dickhead Texans fighting over access to some bullshit shale-oil reserves. A lot of wealth and power was at stake, but Tracy believed the mediation should be a piece of cake despite the involvement of the worst type of client: the arrogant, full-a-cum, ten-gallon ego type. She planned to research the ancestral land grants and government compacts struck when the Lone Star State was a once sovereign nation. She would consult with lawyers who specialize in property law, and become knowledgeable in the field of ownership precedence in the petroleum extraction industry. Before Tracy initiated a

mediation session she would already know which party was the clear winner and which was the clear loser Tracy would then approach the clear winner with “evidence,” some of it contorted as necessary into new, dire shapes, showing he was seriously vulnerable – perhaps the clear loser – and persuade him on the merits of compromise. She would also talk to the clear loser and demonstrate how he was the clear loser. In the course of her presentation, Tracy would insinuate that through careful negotiation she could get him something better than bupkis. In the end, after lots of obligatory ranting and posturing, each side would embrace the resolution and split Tracy Shepard’s fee – a sum they would at first consider exorbitant, but after considering the tax write-offs and the opportunity costs of continuing the dispute, would conclude was not so awful after all. Stretched out on the chaise longue, pleasantly tipsy and her vision slightly blurred, Tracy studied the light of the colorful lanterns strung around the pool refracting in the Champagne bubbles rising from the bottom of her slender glass.

At that moment, as Tracy Shepard relaxed with her stylish cocktail, Fischer Cuttbate glumly exited LAX and boarded a dodgy shuttle bus for the nearby Travelodge Hotel. He had just flown in from New York, stuffed into a cramped coach seat situated near the smelly bathroom for eight horrible hours (two of them spent idling on the tarmac) denied by Delta Airlines the most basic of life’s dignities. Fischer chose to stay at the bottom-barrel Travelodge for its cheap room rates, but also for its close proximity to the airport. He harbored no illusions the place might be clean and comfortable. Indeed, a quick perusal of the customer reviews posted on the web set his expectations low.

“This property is a slum!”

“We awoke with bites on our arms from bed bugs and found bed bugs in our luggage when we returned to Canada.”

“Weird layout, creepy shower.”

And one review that simply stated, “Ick.”

Fischer checked into his dismal room and rushed straight-away to the bathroom. Locked into the middle seat, he had tolerated painful abdominal cramps for eight hours rather than sit upon the urine-splashed toilet seat in the plane’s rancid aft restroom, but now his insistent intestines demanded Fischer’s undivided attention. Gingerly wiping his tender ass after dispatching an anaconda-sized load, Fischer discovered a used syringe carelessly tossed behind the toilet. *I gotta put that one in my online review.* Finished in the bathroom, he stepped back into the main room and for the first time noted the shredded drapes and the walls yellowed by nicotine. Beckoned by the noisy air conditioner, Fischer went across the room to adjust the fan speed only to find the knob broken off. Warm, stale air poured into his face through dirty slits. *And all this other shit’s going into my review, too, Travelodge bastards!*


Fischer walked across West Century Boulevard to an ugly but passable Mexican restaurant and consumed a burrito the approximate size and shape of a football – an inexpensive tube of flour stuffed with rice, beans, chorizo, greasy sauce, cilantro, something resembling Alpo, tomatoes, fucking hot peppers, and a surprise, or perhaps a joke, bananas. Fischer slurped it down in 75 seconds the way he used to devour lunch in grade school – very fast and with minimal chewing, before the bulky, imbecilic basketball jocks and their sycophants could defile his meal by spitting on his peanut butter sandwich or planting a

booger in his Jell-O.

Sated by the burrito, Fischer ambled down the street to a 24 hour strip club and began drinking outrageously expensive tequilas straight with lime and salt. At 2 a.m. he stumbled back to his crappy motel room and brushed his teeth with his finger – he had bring along a tube of toothpaste but not his toothbrush. Fischer flopped into bed and tried to forget that in fewer than four hours he would have to take the shuttle bus back to LAX to catch an early flight to New York City. At least this time he would be sitting in first class and wouldn't have to deal with luggage – no need for it given the quick turnaround on his itinerary. Lying naked in bed, a bit randy from leering at the 19-year-old Asians and Guatemalans shimmying and gyrating at the strip club, he tuned the TV to the motel's porno channel and eventually blew a load watching a young, fat girl costumed like Snow White suck off seven dwarves on the "Plumper Network." Displaying a sort of cinematic mastery, the director of the movie managed to get seven actual dwarves to cum one after the other in rapid succession onto the girl's stunned face. At the end she resembled a glazed donut. Halfway through the scene Fischer suffered flaccidity from laughing at the too-funny improbable scene. To recover rigidity he visualized his sixth grade teacher, Miss Borsalino, a chunky twenty-something who wore short skirts and bright red lipstick. As an adolescent he had often masturbated to fantasies involving Miss Borsalino; in the musty Travelodge bed, Fischer recalled a favorite image of her in the front of the classroom bending over to pick up a piece of chalk. That did the trick. Fischer wiped off his abdomen with a towel and crossed his fingers that when he boarded the flight back to the East Coast he would encounter a specific traveler, a Ms. Tracy Shepard. He

had planned for five months to ensure it would happen – that he would find himself sitting next to her in first class, row 2 on Delta’s flight 78 to JFK Airport.

CHAPTER FOUR

n board the plane back to New York, Tracy Shepard was more than pleasantly surprised to see her airport savior – her White Knight, perhaps? – Fischer Cuttbate, sitting in the aisle seat in row 2, reading the LA Times and looking a bit ruffled. Sometimes Fischer’s work required him to look like a million bucks – tailored suits, custom-made shoes, expensive wristwatches – but today he surmised that by dressing like an unassuming guy who could be mistaken for someone who hands out buckets of golf balls at the driving range, Ms. Shepard might find him more down-to-earth, more approachable. The casual clothing and unpolished façade suggested to Tracy that Fischer was one of those highly-confident men who refuse to obsess on appearances. The kind who are comfortable being themselves. In her line of work

Tracy rarely encountered such men. Mostly, her clients were loath to compromise lest they appear weak and short on confidence. Mediating disputes with such men always took too long, required too much effort and sapped the energy from everyone involved.

Fischer looked up and smiled broadly, happy to meet once again the glamorous woman for whom he sacrificed his first class seat.

Tracy felt uncomfortable calling him “Fish,” the name he insisted on when they first met at gate B20 three days earlier. “Fisch ... er? Is that you?” She couldn’t bring herself to say it. Not yet.

He folded his newspaper and straightened up from a slump that had rounded his posture. “Well, good morning, Tracy. How are you? Did you make it to your meeting on time the other day?” Fischer stood up to give Tracy room to step into the window seat. As she passed by him her shapely ass rubbed against the front of his pants. He detected the aroma of Van Cleef & Arpels.

“I can’t thank you enough for giving up your seat for me before. You’re a true gentleman, Fischer.” Contrary to her rules – for what was the point of offering up something after you’ve already achieved your goal? – she added, “I wish I could make it up to you.”

“Think nothing of it. My meeting with the venture capitalists wasn’t until the following day. And please, call me Fish.”

“OK, Fish.” Tracy sat down and kicked off her Louboutins. Fischer noted the fine definition of her feet. He averted his gaze – her feet were so sexy that he feared he might get caught staring like so many blundering men who ogle cleavage at the checkout counter.

Because it was completely out of character for her to become embroiled in a shouting match with an airline gate agent, and because she didn't want Fischer to think she was a disorganized scatterbrain, Tracy felt compelled to explain how she came to be in the predicament of having no seat on the plane. "You know, Fish, I travel all over the country for my business, and that was the first time I ever had to deal with being bumped because the airline overbooked the flight." She looked at Fischer hopefully, and when she didn't perceive that he was overwhelmingly convinced, she continued, "I mean, the airlines often overbook, as you know, but I always make it a habit to arrive well in advance. The other day, though, my limo driver overslept and I got to the airport just a few minutes before the flight took off."

"Hey, it can happen to anyone, Tracy. Bottom line, though: you got on the plane and made your meeting. Someone else would have caved in and gone on standby for the next flight – or worse, driven home and cried about it. Your perseverance paid off."

Tracy felt better now. *My perseverance paid off. Nice.*

The two made small talk for another 20 minutes, and after the plane reached cruising altitude each retreated into solitude: Fischer reading *A Life Decoded* by Craig Venter, and Tracy tethered to her iPhone. The muffled sounds emanating from her earbuds suggested Tracy was listening to an audiobook instead of music. About an hour into the flight, Tracy pulled out her earbuds and wrapped the cord around the iPhone. She noted Fischer's choice of reading material: an autobiography by the famous biotechnologist who bested the US Government in the race to map the human genome. She could no longer resist asking, "You had a meeting with VCs? What sort of business are

you in, Fischer?”

Fischer dog-eared the page and stashed the book into the seat pocket. He replied, “I co-own a biotech firm with my twin brother Fletcher. RodCone Laboratories is the name. I’m sure you’ve never heard of it.” Tracy shook her head graciously to indicate that, no, she hadn’t heard of it but that she remained intrigued nonetheless. As Fischer spoke, he leaned toward Tracy onto his left butt cheek, pivoting so he could remove his wallet. He retrieved a business card and handed it to her. “We’re developing a therapy for a rare ophthalmologic affliction, and so far all the preliminary test results have been encouraging. We’ve gotten to the point where we’re about ready to start clinical trials. That’s when serious financing becomes necessary, hence my meeting with the VCs. They act like royalty, you know; I practically had to genuflect and kiss their rings.” Tracy chuckled, recalling the pomp and circumstance surrounding the Catholic milestones in her life: closing her eyes and sticking her tongue out for First Communion as though she were expecting a facial cumshot; taking a slap on the cheek from the sadistic Bishop during Confirmation; choking on pungent incense during midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

“What’s the rare affliction you’re trying to tackle? Or is that a trade secret?”

“Oh, no. No secret. I doubt you’ve ever heard of it, though. It’s kind of rare – retinitis pigmentosa. It’s a type of progressive retinal dystrophy, a genetic disease that brings about tunnel vision and usually, total blindness.”

Stunned, Tracy’s mouth parted and her eyes widened. “My God! Of course I’ve heard of RP! My father suffers from it. He’s almost completely blind now. Poor man. He used to teach at

Columbia. Physics. But now ...” Predicting that she might take on the sad, pathetic, unbecoming look of a concerned but impotent middle-aged offspring, Tracy turned away and looked out the window at a passing contrail. After she regained her composure, Tracy turned back to face Fischer and stated with enthusiasm, “It’s so exciting to hear your company is working on a cure. Tell me – what kind of results have you seen so far?”

“Well, first, it’s not a cure, it’s a therapy. RP patients will have to take a pill every day – basically for the rest of their lives – to improve, stabilize and maintain their sight. But back to your question: the results have been remarkable. Beta-tests have shown regeneration of active retinal cells by up to 85 percent.” Fischer radiated pride upon reporting this accomplishment.

Tracy sat back in her seat. She hadn’t realized that in her desire to learn more about the RP therapy she had invaded Fischer’s space, moving in perhaps a bit too close for strangers – although oddly he didn’t seem like a stranger to her. He was easy to talk to; his demeanor was calming. Dressed like a golf driving range employee, he seemed approachable. Tracy had lots of questions, and she felt uninhibited in asking them.

“So what did the VCs say, Fish? When will you be starting the clinical trials?”

Fischer stroked his face. Concern was evident in his expression. “That’s the problem. You see, my twin bro ...”

“Fletcher, right?” interrupted Tracy, needing to demonstrate her astuteness in recalling names after hesitating with Fischer’s earlier.

“Yes, Fletcher. He goes by Fletch. You see, Fletch doesn’t want to bring any investors into the business. I guess he’s worried they’ll take over the operations or interfere with the research.

He means well, I suppose, but he simply has no concept of what it takes to launch a costly new drug into the market. The VCs are hot for the project, but Fletch just won't budge. And without the outside funding, we're stuck." He shook his head to amplify his disappointment with the current status.

The story of Fischer's recalcitrant twin brother struck Tracy as an unnecessary tragedy in the making – a groundbreaking drug smothered in the cradle simply because one man doesn't understand how a modern high-tech business must be run. The story saddened her immensely because the malady for which the drug had been invented to vanquish was retinitis pigmentosa, the curse that had befallen her father. She wanted to know more. "Why can't you bring the VCs on board anyway? You know, go around your brother."

"Fletch and I inherited the business from our father, and good old Dad – a genius of biology and medicine, but a piker on business planning – structured it so that we each own exactly 50 percent of the shares. I can't make a major decision like bringing new investors in without Fletch's vote. The bylaws of the corporation are quite clear on that point. What really pisses me off – excuse me – what irritates me most is that Fletch is completely hands-off. He never involves himself in the day-to-day operations, and rarely ever talks to me. I haven't seen him in three months. He only communicates to object to my proposals. Basically, I'm responsible for running everything, but lack the authority to make key decisions." Fischer shrugged his shoulders at the futility of his no-win position.

The gears in Tracy's brain began to turn and interlock, meshing smoothly, cranking in unison; it was a machine engineered and tuned to produce resolutions. Tracy said, "I'm a

professional mediator, Fischer. A pretty good one at that. I help resolve differences for a living. Perhaps I could be of assistance in getting your brother to change his mind. I really would hate to see the progress on your new drug grind to a halt.” Fischer didn’t seem to know how to respond, so Tracy added, “Besides, I owe you for giving me your seat the other day.”

“Really, Tracy, you don’t owe ...”

“I want to help Fischer. I do. Let me help you on this.” An image flashed into her head: that of her father walking on his own to Pupin Hall as he had done for his entire academic career until the frightening darkness encroached, completely obliterating his eyesight and turning him into a prisoner under house arrest.

Fischer sat quietly for a moment, then responded chipperly, “Well, I know you people, mediators and the like, I mean, make a lot of money – way more than the value of a first class seat. Let me at least pay you ... something.”

Tracy knew that she would be more successful in getting Fischer’s permission to intervene if she allowed him to make a token payment than if she gave him a freebie, so she relented on a point that meant nothing to her anyway. Like the champion negotiator she trained to be. “OK. If you insist. Let’s say \$5,000.”

“Deal!” responded Fischer quickly with a big grin and an extended hand. Tracy smiled too upon hearing Fischer utter her favorite word. She chuckled to herself – *he ain’t much of a negotiator.*

Tracy retrieved her iPhone from her purse and logged the pertinent information: Fischer’s phone number and email address, the website of RodCone Labs, and Fletcher’s home address in New Jersey. She recommended to Fischer that he first

explain her role to Fletch. Once things were set with Fletch she would arrange a meeting directly with him – no pressure, no preordained outcomes. Just a conversation.

The five hour trip from LA seemed to take no time at all, and soon Delta flight 78 was parked at the gate at JFK airport. On the sidewalk outside the concourse Fischer and Tracy said their goodbyes. Tracy asked, “Where’s your luggage, Fischer?”

Fischer hesitated for a moment and then replied, “Um, the airline sends it straight from the plane to my home. I signed up for their premier secure delivery service. Given the sensitive nature of the materials I travel with, I can’t take a chance that some shifty baggage handler might swipe my stuff.”

Tracy nodded in agreement. *Shifty baggage handlers, uppity gate agents – none can be trusted.*

Just as Tracy’s limo driver opened the rear door and she stepped off the curb, her lovely legs revealed to mid-thigh, Fischer suddenly rushed toward her and breathlessly asked, “Would you like to come by my office sometime and see a presentation on the RP drug? I’d be honored to take you through the project.”

Tracy replied, “The honor would be all mine, Fish. Call me anytime.”

The limo sped away and merged into a sea of yellow cabs, rental car shuttles, and smoky MTA buses. Fischer noted once more the sad, dismal environs of JFK airport, a veritable eyesore when compared to the gleaming, architecturally splendid airports serving every major foreign city. *Jesus, what a fucking day.* Exhausted and nearly catatonic, he shuffled slowly to the parking garage across from the concourse, located his rusty Subaru – now covered with pigeon droppings – and drove to the house he was renting month by month in Lodi, New Jersey.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fischer Cuttbate announced proudly, “Ms. Tracy Shepard, allow me to introduce you to Dr. James Torrent, RodCone Lab’s chief scientist, and Mr. Chad Knecht, our Director of Business Development. Jim will be delivering the presentation on the RP research today, Tracy.” He pronounced Chad’s surname “connect.” How-do-you-do’s all around.

Fischer had arranged for Tracy to visit his company’s offices located in a rather ugly 1960s-era building on 17th Street mid-block between Sixth and Seventh Avenues in downtown Manhattan to hear a formal presentation of the retinitis pigmentosa therapy. In addition to RodCone Labs the building was occupied by a talent agency, a rare coin dealer, a nail salon, and a self-publishing company. Nothing about the place would

suggest leading-edge biotechnology research was conducted within. Tracy never noticed. She was singularly interested in learning more about the RP drug; Fischer could sense it in her voice when she called to thank him yet again for his gesture of kindness, and for offering to share the details of his company's confidential project with her.

The day after her flight back from LA, Tracy visited her father at his tiny apartment in Inwood to tell him what she had learned from the owner of a biotech company about a promising cure. She thought of Fischer as the owner, not the co-owner. Tracy portrayed the drug as a cure, not a therapy – something akin to a miracle. The old man's reaction, a mixture of optimism and childlike enthusiasm – like a kid anxious to find a puppy under the Christmas tree – almost broke her heart. She envisioned her father once again walking the streets and strolling the parks of New York City unaided. And reading the many professional journals that he had ceased subscribing to. And watching a classic movie with her at the Film Forum or an opera at Lincoln Center. Oh, how she desperately needed to convince Fletcher to get with the program and green-light the infusion of venture capital so clinical trials of the RP drug could begin forthwith.

Tracy sat at the end of a long conference table. A bottle of water and a notepad had been set out on the table in front of her. Fischer powered on the overhead projector and Jim connected his laptop. Chad dimmed the lights and sat in a chair across from Fischer who was seated next to Tracy. Fischer caught a whiff of Van Cleef & Arpels. It reminded him of his close encounter with Tracy's shapely ass on the plane. He began to get an erection. He

crossed his legs and shifted uncomfortably in the chair. Fischer could not expunge the image of Tracy's sexy feet from his head. *Oh, how I wish I could suck her toes!*

Dr. Torrent described the signs and symptoms of RP, surveyed the established research into causes of the disease, and summarized the failed attempts to develop a cure, including a barbaric method pioneered in the USSR involving the injection of quacky medicine directly into the patient's eyeball. Tracy grimaced when Torrent flashed an image of a doctor penetrating eyeball viscera with a needle as though he were about to rupture a balloon. After going through the background material, Torrent moved on to explain how RodCone Laboratories, running proprietary bioinformatics programs on a supercomputer rented from Stony Brook University, had unraveled the genetic code of pig and human retina cells. This was unprecedented stuff – a breakthrough for which no other big pharmaceutical company could lay claim. The findings led to the development of extremely complex and secret computer models that simulate how proteins in the eye fold in on themselves in response to stimulation from light. Although Fischer had claimed at the start that the presentation was designed for the lay person, Tracy found the concepts difficult to follow. She got the basic gist but much of the material flew way above her head – so far above in fact that she had no choice but to accept all the conclusions on faith. Protein folding? Rhodopsin? Teraflops? It all sounded so exotic and exciting. Tracy momentarily contrasted her line of work – essentially sorting out who should get to play next with the shovel in the sandbox – to Fischer's pursuit of life-changing cures that would benefit society immensely. She felt diminished.

When Jim clicked on the final chart – nothing but a giant

question mark indicating time for questions – Tracy turned toward Fischer and said, “Very impressive. Thank you so much for the presentation. I really enjoyed it.” Fischer stood up, followed by Chad and finally Tracy.

“Thank you, Tracy, for your interest. If you have some time now, I’d love to take you to lunch. How about it?”

Tracy had already scheduled a conference call for 1:00 with one of the Texans to discuss her initial opinion on the shale-oil tracts, but she decided right then to postpone it to another day. “I’d be delighted,” she replied eagerly.

As Fischer and Tracy proceeded to the exit, Chad Knecht ambled up and said to Tracy, “Thank you for coming in today Ms. Shepard. I’ll email you a copy of Dr. Torrent’s presentation. And good luck in your meeting with Mr. Cuttbate’s brother.”

Fischer took Tracy to a restaurant on 10th Avenue at 18th, right across from one of the few staircases leading up from ground level to the High Line park, a wonderful stretch of gardens, vintage train tracks, and scenic viewing areas set upon the former elevated railroad. The High Line track was opened in the 1930s and ran from 34th Street through Chelsea to Gansevoort Street. It had been used to transport goods to factories and wholesalers on the far west side of Manhattan. The rationale for constructing the High Line had been to reduce accidents between cars and trains at grade crossings; now, long-retired and finally rehabilitated, the park offered a quiet vantage point above the bustle and din of the activity on the street.

Over a meal of ceviche and wood-fired pizza consumed beneath the boughs of live trees in the restaurant’s vaulted atrium – once a loading dock for an Industrial Revolution-era

factory – Tracy and Fischer engaged in “first lunch” foundational conversation. Tracy was always more comfortable talking about her mediation prowess than personal interests, so she recalled the David Bowie ticket episode which planted the career seed, summarized the development of her practice, and described her recent experience with the feuding West Coast nanotechnology companies. Although Tracy had a lot of questions to ask of Fischer, she found it hard to stop talking about the art and science of negotiation. She wondered what had happened to her ability to carry on a normal dialog with a man who was not a client. *Does he even care about what I’m saying?* It had been many years since Tracy was in a romantic relationship; maybe she was simply out of practice. She blamed her lack of companionship on the grueling challenges of her job: generating new business, interviewing clients, conducting research, traveling. All these things demanded her full attention and consumed her substantial energy, leaving little time to pursue and nurture a relationship. But when she was brutally honest with herself, Tracy acknowledged that more than any job-related pressure, it was her extended exposure to the selfish, destructive antics of her conceited clientele that smothered any desire to get deeply entangled in the life and soul of another person. As Fischer munched on the crust of his Margherita pizza, Tracy made an inelegant attempt to cut off her monologue and segue to the topic of RodCone’s RP research. “Basically, my fascination with game theory led me to develop some very effective negotiation strategies. Uh ... tell me, Fish, what led you to take up the challenge of retinitis?” Tracy sipped her wine and hoped Fischer would take over for awhile.

“I thought you’d never ask. Up until ten years ago, I’d never

heard of it – but when the eye doctor diagnosed my mother with it, I freaked out. Retinitis Pigmentosa. Good God. It sounded like some evil creature in a bad horror movie, or a species of man-eating hogs.” Fletcher chuckled nervously; Tracy could tell he was trying to hide his concern. His lame attempt at humor could not mask the pain he apparently still felt. “The ophthalmologist described the affliction and what would happen down the road to my mother’s sight. He said it was rare for a woman to get the disease. Fletcher and I decided to steer father’s business away from manufacturing vaccines and toward researching a cure ... or a therapy, whatever ... for RP.”

Tracy said, “I find that very admirable, Fish. So, tell me, how is your mother doing now?” She debated whether to order flourless Valrhona chocolate cake with bittersweet chocolate sauce or orange blossom cheesecake with mango ginger compote.

Fischer carefully placed his silverware cross-wise atop the half-eaten slice of pizza, as if he were condemning the cheesy triangle to death. He dabbed the corners of his mouth. The solemnity of his motions intrigued Tracy.

“Our mother is dead. She fell down the stairs of an open delivery door while walking along the sidewalk on Lexington Avenue.”

“Oh my God ...” Tracy put her hand over her mouth.

“Some Indian restaurant if I’m not mistaken. They didn’t have the safety bar in place, and because of her condition, she didn’t see the opening. She tumbled all the way down the concrete steps.” Fischer’s voice cracked at the end, and he looked aside as though he were trying to hail the waiter.

“That’s terrible, Fish. I’m so sorry.”

Fischer replied, “Thanks, Tracy. We sued the restaurant.

That's how we got the money to start the research." A moment passed. "How about some dessert?"

After lunch the couple strolled along the elevated parkway and enjoyed the serenity above the relentless traffic. Fischer stopped to watch a tugboat tow a barge down the Hudson River. He leaned forward and rested his forearms on the railing. Tracy did likewise. Following Fischer's sad story, she felt more comfortable to be next to him.

"How'd you like your lunch, Tracy?"

"It was very good. And I've wanted to walk along the High Line for some time now – I'm glad you suggested it. They've really done a nice job fixing it up."

After a minute during which he intently watched the tugboat until it passed out of sight behind a building, Fischer remarked, "You know, Tracy, you don't have to speak with my brother if you don't want to. He's a pain in the ass, if you must know the truth. No offense, but I doubt you could convince him to change his mind. In fact, I'll bet he won't even agree to meet with you."

Tracy turned toward Fischer and flashed him a devious smile, "No offense, Fish, but I think you've underestimated my skills. And you lost the bet. Fletch already agreed to meet me. I'm taking the train to Hamilton Square tomorrow morning."

"Wow. I *am* impressed. Tomorrow morning? Geez, it usually takes him a month to respond to a request – that's if he responds at all."

The couple walked to the end of the High Line and descended the stairs to Gansevoort Street. Fischer was going to hail a cab but Tracy's limo driver was already there waiting; moments earlier she texted him with an order to come pick them up. Tracy sat

next to Fischer and casually pulled her skirt several inches above her knee. He figured she had done so simply for comfort, but he couldn't rule out the possibility that it was a flirt, signaling an interest in romance, testing Fischer's amorous interests. Fischer secretly wanted badly to see more of Tracy's beautiful legs, and to validate whether his guess was correct about the color of the panties she wore underneath her crisp linen skirt. *I bet they're black and frilly.* He wondered whether her nipples were pink or brown. He started to get aroused, but instead of flirting as well, he moved ever-so-slightly away from Tracy and closer to the window.

Years ago, when Fischer was a crazy, foolish, drunken teenaged delinquent, he had his balls tattooed with a pair of dice – one cube with four pips on his right nut, another with three pips on the left one – and that was something he could not allow Tracy to see. Not now, anyway.

After dropping Fischer off at the 17th Street office Tracy relaxed in the back of the limo, greatly satisfied with Fischer's declaration that he was impressed with her capabilities. Although it was illogical, she felt as though her reputation was on the line. Now she was even more motivated to close the deal with brother Fletch and help RodCone Labs secure the financing to complete the clinical trials and move on to FDA approval. Tracy smiled wryly to herself. She had caught Fischer staring at her legs – and he seemed to be bulging a bit in the crotch. *I can still bring it on.*

The limo pulled into Sutton Place. The driver strode briskly around the back of the vehicle and opened the door for Tracy. She stepped out and walked into the lobby of the opulent pre-war co-op building, past the doorman who was dressed somewhat foppishly like a Beefeater, and rode the elevator to her well-

appointed apartment overlooking the mighty Queensboro Bridge and the East River below. Tracy checked her phone messages and pawed through some mail, virtually all of it junk, sitting on a vintage art deco sideboard beneath her prized possession, a Kandinsky painted when the artist was a member of Die Blaue Vier. Tracy went into the walk-in closet adjoining her bedroom, a space larger than some studio apartments renting for \$2,000 a month on the Lower East Side. She kicked off her shoes, one of more than 100 pairs she owned. Tracy's passion for shoes didn't rise quite to the level of Imelda Marcos's compulsion, but her collection was formidable nonetheless. Looking forward to the therapeutic effects of a long, scalding bath, she undressed. The last article of clothing she removed was her linen skirt. He couldn't know, of course, but Fischer had lost another bet with himself: Tracy's panties weren't black and frilly. Tracy wasn't wearing panties at all.

CHAPTER SIX

At the moment Fletch opened the front door of his bungalow, the very first thought to enter Tracy's mind was how much he looked like Fischer. The similarity was remarkable, but why not. *They're identical twins.* Yes, Fletch parted his hair on the right, whereas Fischer combed his hair straight back. And he sported huge, boxy eyeglasses like those worn by Walter Cronkite in the 1960s, whereas Fischer wore no optical implements. But besides these differences, Fletcher looked exactly like his identical twin. On the train ride from Manhattan Tracy wondered if he would also be a charming, engaging host like Fish? That hopeful notion was quickly demolished when Fletcher, instead of inviting Tracy to come inside, barked, "You're early. You'll have to wait outside until I'm done with my call."

Tracy was taken aback, but not too much. After all, she had been the recipient of boatloads of ungentlemanly behavior in her career. Still, she had traveled out to Fletcher Cuttbate's bungalow with the preconceived notion that as an identical twin, he would possess a disposition similar to that of Fischer's. Tracy recalled the "nature versus nurture" theory taught in her undergrad Psych courses, and concluded something odd must have occurred during the boys' formative years with their medical-genius father. Perhaps the elder Cuttbate openly favored Fischer over Fletcher. Or maybe it was the other way around. Tracy was never sure about psychological theories.

While cooling her heels on the simple front porch seated upon a hard, cast iron chair with peeling paint and no cushion, Tracy was startled out of a daydream when Fletcher abruptly swung open the screen door. "OK. I'm ready now, Mrs. Shepard."

"Ms. Shepard. Ms. Tracy Shepard. How do you do, Mr. Cuttbate?"

Tracy extended her hand, and after a brief moment in which she fully expected Fletcher to turn away rudely, he took her hand and shook it once. "How do you do, Ms. Shepard? I trust your trip from New York was pleasant."

"Very nice." Tracy followed Fletcher into the bungalow and then farther into a sitting room cluttered with books and magazines, computer equipment, an electric guitar, and a couple of easels propping up partially-completed paintings of surgical images vaguely reminiscent of Frida Kahlo's pain-filled self-portraits.

"What a pleasant house you have here, Mr. Cuttbate. Very cozy."

"No, it's not. But it's all I can afford." Tracy kept the cordial

smile adhered to her face lest she appear susceptible to mind-game manipulation, the bane of professional mediators. “Tell me, Ms. Shepard – what did my brother say to you? Why are you here? Does he expect you to twist my mind and get me to bend over to his demands? Because I’ll tell you right now, I’m not going to vote to authorize those vultures to swoop in and take over the business my father worked so hard to build. I hope you understand that Ms. Shepard.”

“Yes I do. Please call me Tracy. I didn’t come here to twist your mind. I came here at your brother’s request simply to help him understand your position more thoroughly. He’s passionate about the RP therapy, as I’m sure you are as well, and he very much wants to find a way to advance it through the clinical trial phase.”

Fletcher smirked, “OK, Tracy. Let’s chat, shall we. I go by ‘Fletch.’ I assume Fischer is paying you to do this, but that doesn’t bother me. I trust you’ll be open-minded.”

In her experience Tracy found it useless to lie, for it complicated negotiations. An untruth will inevitably surface through a careless comment, or be forced into the blinding light of scrutiny by another contradictory untruth.

“That’s the only way I operate, Fletch. You have my word. Think of me as an impartial observer.”

Fletch nodded and offered a Tracy a seat on a 19th century divan sandwiched between a stack of hardcover novels and a funky-looking floor lamp festooned with a shade upon which slivered moons, pointy stars, ringed planets and symbols resembling the tetragrammaton were imprinted. He sat in a low slung distressed leather Art Deco club chair set at a 90 degree angle to the divan. Tracy marveled at the eclectic collection of

furniture – no two pieces from the same era – and wondered about the mind of Fletcher Cuttbate. *Clearly a non-conformist.*

To help her round out the profile she asked casually, “Do you live here alone, Fletch?”

“Yes. And I’ve never been married, in case that was going to be your next question.”

Tracy crossed her long legs and clasped her hands over her knees. She had met his type before – quite regularly, in fact. Through obnoxious behavior and an attitude of superiority, projecting coarseness and rudeness, this type sought to control the conversation, or minimally render it meaningless.

Tracy said, “I saw a very impressive presentation about your company’s RP drug the other day. It seems like it could revolutionize the treatment for people on the verge of going blind. But I’m just a layperson. What’s your assessment of the drug and its future potential?”

“It has its plusses and minuses.”

“Are you confident that it’s ready for clinical trial?”

“Maybe.” A telephone in the hallway rang. Fletch left the room without saying anything.

Under her breath Tracy muttered, “Good Lord, what a stiff.” Ten minutes went by, then twenty. Tracy stood up and wandered about the room. She ran her fingers lightly across the strings of the blonde Fender Telecaster guitar. She paged through some of the magazines lumped in a pile underneath the coffee table, mostly newsweeklies dating as far back as 15 years. Tracy studied a painting on the easel depicting the naked torso of a man, arteries running outside his body from his eyes to his heart. The man’s face was serene. Tracy cocked her head to the right.

“Sorry about that. Where were we?”

Startled, Tracy spun around quickly as though she had been caught looking into someone's diary. She returned to her seat, pretty much concluding her hour-long trip from Manhattan had been a colossal waste of time.

"Uh, I think we were talking about ... the drug. Is it ready to be tested, in your opinion?"

He proffered a single word: "Possibly."

"Look, Mr. Cuttbate. I only came ..."

"What's your interest in all this Mrs. Shepard? Why do you care so much?" He asked sarcastically, "Does someone you love have RP or something?"

Tracy fumed at the insolence. "Yes, as a matter of fact. Someone I love very much – my poor father – suffers from this hideous disease." Tracy stepped out of the role of impartial mediator and expressed her emotions. She figured Fletcher would never negotiate in good faith, and besides, she felt like shoving it down his throat so he knew his behavior was out of line and unappreciated. "And it causes me great pain to think that a promising drug won't see the light of day just because you and your brother can't come to terms on financing the next phase of development. It's a goddamned shame." She reached for her purse and started to stand up from the divan.

Fletcher wiped the smirk off his face. "Please don't go, Ms. Shep ... Tracy." He looked deeply into Tracy's eyes for a split second, then down at his fidgety hands. For a moment she thought he might cry. Ashamed now to look at Tracy directly, Fletcher said, "I ... I'm really sorry for acting like a jerk. I mean it ... sincerely. Please, sit down. Fischer didn't tell me your father has retinitis. I'm so sorry to hear that." Fletcher finally summoned the courage to face Tracy. He looked again into her

eyes and pleaded, "Please, Tracy. Don't go."

Tracy sat back down. She nodded silently and a bit smugly, to show appreciation for Fletch's concern, but also to make sure he recognized her gracious acceptance of what she took to be an apology for his rude behavior.

"Would you like something to drink?" asked Fletch hopefully.

Fletcher returned to the den from the kitchen with a couple glasses of lemonade and a notebook. He sat next to Tracy on the divan and began to reveal some rather confidential information. He placed the thick notebook on the coffee table and opened it to a spot in the middle where hand-written equations containing exotic symbols from the Greek and Hebrew alphabets had been scrawled.

"I suppose Jim Torrent told you all about the wonderful therapy the lab is working on. How someday RP patients will take a pill every day to reverse the degradation of the retina and maintain the quality of their sight. Right? Kind of like blood pressure medicine – you take it every day for the rest of your life."

Tracy nodded. Fletch went on, "What do you know about the pharmaceutical industry, Tracy?" She shook her head, "Not much."

"It's a brutal, cutthroat business," explained Fletch. "Companies routinely bet the ranch that their drug will be a winner in the market, and if it works, they can reap huge rewards all the while enjoying years of patent protection from competition. But if the drug doesn't pan out they can suffer big-time losses. It's not uncommon for firms to go broke. Look at Imclone – the FDA nixed their cancer drug and the CEO went to

jail.” Fletch was animated now; Tracy listened attentively as she drank her perfectly-tart lemonade. “Given the risk and volatility, pharmas prefer to develop therapies that generate long term, sustainable, consistent revenues – think Lipitor or Somavert – not drugs that cure a problem with one or two doses. Why do you think no company really wants to manufacture flu vaccines? Not without a big government subsidy, anyway.”

“I guess I never really thought of it that way. What’s Somavert?”

“Um ... it’s a treatment for, uh, acromegaly – it counteracts growth hormones. Anyway, RodCone, under the dictatorial management of my brother and his illustrious Director of Business Development, is pursuing a lifelong therapy, guaranteeing a nice revenue stream when they could be working on a cure for RP instead.” Fletch tapped at some squiggly scratches in the notebook, suggesting these esoteric equations held the secret to vanquishing retinitis pigmentosa once and for all. Tracy looked at the book then at Fletch who had inched closer to her.

“A cure? My God, Fletch, that’s fantastic.”

“Not if the VCs come in and quash the idea – which they would – in favor of Fish’s therapy. No way would they approve funding the development of a cure. It’s frustrating, but that’s the pharmaceutical industry for you.” Tracy finished her lemonade. “Let me get you another drink, Tracy. I have something else I want to tell you.”

Tracy followed Fletch into the kitchen which appeared to be frozen in 1955. The small aquamarine appliances were greasy but otherwise in pretty good shape, complemented by pink cabinets. The boomerang patterns were worn off the working areas of the Formica countertops. Fletch retrieved a couple dozen lemons from the round-edged Norge Jet-D-Frost refrigerator.

“Does Fischer know about the cure?” asked Tracy.

Fletch replied as he sliced the lemons with a small serrated knife, “A little. He knows I’ve been toying around with it, but he thinks I’m wasting my time. To him it’s a financial loser compared to the therapy. We – a colleague and I – haven’t made any practical progress on a cure beyond mathematical, molecular models because we lack independent funding to take it further. Money is all that drives Fish’s heart, I’m sad to say. Exactly the opposite of my father, rest his soul, and me.” After a beat, “Was the lemonade tart enough? Did I put in too much sugar?”

“It was perfect. Make us some more exactly the same.”

After several minutes of methodically mixing small, incremental amounts of sugar into the lemon juice and water, like a chemist, tasting a sample after each infusion, Fletch declared the lemonade done. He dumped a tray of ice into the big pitcher and carried it back into the den. Tracy walked ahead of him with two glasses and a bowl of potato chips balanced on a plastic cafeteria tray.

“What else did you want to tell me, Fletch?”

Fletch stuffed a few chips into his mouth. “I can’t put my finger on it – *crunch, crunch* – finance and business are not my strong suits. I’m really just a poet – *crunch* – and a scientist, but I think Fish’s valuations of the company are – *crunch* - suspect. He’s never wants to share the books with me, and his Director of Business Development, Chad Dis-Knecht, never responds to my requests for information even though I’m co-owner. He sends me useless summaries and obtuse spreadsheets.” Fletch derisively pronounced Chad’s surname “disconnect.” “Half the time, when I open one of his spreadsheets it crashes my

laptop. I think he does it on purpose.” Fletch poured two glasses of lemonade. He pressed on, “I hope it’s not true, but I think Fischer and his shifty finance guy are keeping a second set of books. I have a feeling that he’s trying to undervalue RodCone Labs so that if the drug is successful and we do an IPO, I’ll reap less than my fair share of the proceeds. That’s the other reason I won’t approve the VC financing. It would be like wheeling a Trojan Horse into the company.” Fletch took a long drink from the glass. “Do you understand now, Tracy?”

Tracy’s experience in conducting mediations told her never to accept any side of a story at face value without additional, unbiased confirmation. But at this very moment she felt relaxed and comfortable with Fletcher Cuttbate, just as she had been when in the company of his brother Fischer. Tracy didn’t know what to think.

“It certainly could be troubling, but like I said at the beginning, I’m just an impartial observer.” Tracy sipped her lemonade. Fletch’s expression became morose and he slumped into the divan. After a minute of uncomfortable silence, Tracy changed the subject and asked, “Do you play the guitar, Fletch?”

Given the opening, Fletch’s disposition switched from hopeless dejection to childlike enthusiasm. “Yeah, a little. Well actually, I’ve been playing since I was about nine. I bought that Fender 20 years ago at an auction – it’s the same kind that Keith Richards plays. A 1955 Telecaster.”

“Are you in a band, Fletch?”

“Not anymore. No time.” He stood up and headed for the guitar. Tracy started to fear she may have opened up a can of worms – would Fletch embark presently on a lengthy exhibition of his rock-n-roll prowess? Would she be a prisoner for the next

few hours while Fletch showed off for his captive guest? Tracy sat with a wan smile on her face as Fletch flipped the switch on a small amplifier. It hummed and buzzed until he plugged in the Telecaster.

Fletch strummed the first G chords of “Honky Tonk Women,” playing it exactly like Keith Richards on the original recording. Instead of running through the entire tune, though, he segued into “Angie,” a soft ballad from the Stones’ *Goats Head Soup* album. Tracy was impressed with the fidelity and execution of his performance, and when he finished she applauded politely. Assuming he was done, she prepared to wrap up her visit. Fletch then struck the intro power D chords of “Moonage Daydream,” David Bowie’s gem from *Ziggy Stardust* and one of Tracy’s favorites from her adolescence. Tracy smiled like a kid at the instantly-recognizable intro. Fletch warbled, “I’m an alligator – I’m a mama-papa coming for you ...” Although she hadn’t heard the song in years, Tracy sang out enthusiastically, “I’m a space invader, I’ll be a rock-n-rollin’ bitch for you.” Fletch laughed encouragingly. He and Tracy alternated in singing the lyrics, and by the time Fletch played the Mick Ronson solo, Tracy was on her feet posing like a rock star.

“That was great, Fletch! I haven’t sung out loud like that in ... a long time.” She refrained from revealing a numeric estimate, preferring not to admit that she had led an uptight, reserved, decidedly un-rock-n-roller lifestyle for the past two dozen years.

Fletch sensed the excitement in Tracy’s voice. He knew she wanted to go on, and so did he. “Who’s your favorite rock musician?”

“I don’t know; that’s hard. I was a big fan of glitter as a kid. I really liked Todd Rundgren ...”

Fletch kicked into “I Saw the Light,” a brilliant Rundgren pop tune that had once risen to number 16 on Billboard’s Hot 100 list. This time, Tracy did all the singing, reveling in a song that had been a touchstone for her back at Dalton.

When it was over, Tracy sat down. Her throat was dry from singing and she took a long swig of lemonade. Then she glanced at her watch and bolted upright from the divan. “Shit, the train back to the City leaves in 25 minutes. I’m sorry, Fletch, I’ve got to go. I really enjoyed spending the afternoon with you.”

“Me too. I’m glad it turned out better than it began.”

“What would you like me to say to Fischer on your behalf?”

Fletch turned off the amp, returned the guitar to its stand. Now that the music session was over, he appeared a bit sullen. He replied softly, “Nothing, Tracy. In fact, I’d rather you not mention my paranoid delusions about the company’s finances. I probably shouldn’t have shared the ‘two-books’ hypothesis with you absent any proof. Will you promise not to tell him?”

Tracy nodded, “Of course, Fletch. I promise.”

The cabdriver outside Fletch’s bungalow leaned on the horn long and loudly, breaking the serenity of the middle-class, tree-lined neighborhood. Tracy rushed out the door anxious about missing the train and having to wait alone at the empty, nondescript station for the next departure. *Today of all days, why did I give my driver the day off?* On the way out of the archetypal suburban enclave, zipping past the isolated cul-de-sacs that spurred off from the main street, Tracy imagined spending more quality time with Fletcher. Perhaps, she thought, deep beneath the rough-edges of his defensive persona, he might be a White Knight weighed down by disappointment, his armor encrusted

by disillusionment, a man of unalloyed integrity waiting patiently for someone, the right woman, to earn his trust and scrub away the tarnish from his breastplate and shield. She was strangely drawn to each Cuttbate brother for different reasons: Fischer for his gallantry and business acumen; Fletcher for his artistry and vulnerability.

Fletch waved to Tracy from the porch as her cab pulled away, and when it was well down the block and out of sight he lumbered back inside, holding his half-empty glass of lemonade, and headed to the kitchen with its period-piece appliances. His favorite: a Frigidaire dishwasher into which plates bearing atomic designs might once have been loaded; a snappy number that could have been in the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow during the Nixon/Khrushchev “Kitchen Debate.” Fletch scrounged around under the sink for the bottle of vodka and topped off his drink. He downed it in a single, uninterrupted, extraordinarily satisfying gulp. He stood there motionless for several seconds, enjoying the sensation of alcohol making its way into his circulatory system. First his legs became tingly, then his head became light. Fletch took another gulp, and then muttered, “What a prick Fischer is – a genuine scumbag.” Slowly, he shuffled into the living room and flicked on the TV just as Alex Trebek revealed the Final Jeopardy answer. The category was “Silent Films” and the clue was “In this film Conrad Veidt portrayed a murderous somnambulist; later he played a despicable Nazi major in *Casablanca*.” Before Trebek finished reading the clue, Fletcher blurted at the TV as though he were auditioning for the game, “*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. What is *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*?” Fletcher recalled the actor to whom Trebek referred – Conrad Veidt – and his role in the 1942 spy

film, *Nazi Agent*. The irony was too thick for him to contemplate.

Thirty seconds and a catchy jingle later, all three TV contestants failed to provide the correct clue. Keith wrote “What is *Metropolis*?” Alex wagged his head in a way that suggested “not a bad guess.” Udit wrote “What is *All Quiet on the Western Front*?” Alex: “Oh, so sorry – that was a talkie.” And Gretchen from Arizona wrote, “What is *Gone with the Wind*” to which Alex responded, “I don’t recall any sleepwalkers carrying axes around Tara.” Fletcher grinned at Trebek’s droll humor, and finished off the bottle of vodka.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next morning, in the back seat of the limo on her way to visit her father, Tracy called Fischer Cuttbate at RodCone Labs and relayed the particulars of her meeting with his brother Fletcher. She reported that Fletcher remained essentially unconvinced of the benefits of tapping the venture capital market to fund the clinical trials for the RP drug. She did not mention Fletch's assertion that a viable cure could be developed in place of a costly therapy, nor his suspicion that Fischer and his business associates were secretly keeping two sets of books. Tracy told Fischer that she believed Fletcher was truly committed to the development of the RP drug, and to the success of RodCone Labs. Fischer responded with a derisive "Hah."

"Fish, you've got something really special with the RP drug.

You must see to it that it makes it to the market ... in the most socially responsible form possible. I feel confident that if you pursue the most socially responsible form of the drug your brother will go along.” Tracy expected Fischer to query her on what she meant by “the most socially responsible form,” but if he was curious he didn’t reveal it.

“I really appreciate you trying to help, Tracy. I know it was a hassle to go to Jersey, and I’m sure it wasn’t too pleasant meeting with Fletch in his crappy bungalow. He’s kind of a hermit as you can see, and his social skills leave something to be desired.”

Tracy recalled what a courteous and engaging host Fletch had become following the initial bumpiness. She wondered whether Fischer felt compelled by guilt to apologize for his brother, but she made no attempt to contradict his assessment. After all, she’d only known the twin brothers for a brief time; given the immaturity of her relationships with the two men, Tracy understood it was inadvisable to insert herself between them. “Well, Fish, I hope it all turns out right for you and Fletch.”

“Thanks again. And please, send me the bill. Seriously. I value your time and expertise ...”

“That’s OK, Fish, I enjoyed ...”

“Please, Tracy. I want to compensate you for your efforts. I’ll feel bad if you won’t let me.”

“Alright. I understand. Have a great day, Fish. Keep in touch.”

Almost as an afterthought, Fischer said, “By the way, you should have gotten the PowerPoint slides from the briefing the other day. Chad sent them.”

“OK, I’ll look for them. Bye bye.” Tracy hung up. Out the window she spotted the Cloisters, the stately museum endowed by John D. Rockefeller and constructed in 1938 from reassembled

portions of five medieval French buildings. Her driver exited the Henry Hudson Parkway onto Dyckman Street and headed a few more blocks to a tidy townhouse near Inwood Hill Park. Tracy let herself into the building; the driver waited, double-parked in the limo, reading the comics and working on a variety of puzzles in the *NY Post*.

From the foyer as she closed the door behind her, Tracy called out, “Dad? It’s me. Where are you?”

A toilet flushed, followed by the sound of water running in the sink and then the thud of an object falling on the floor. “Oh, damn,” sighed Charles Shepard, scolding himself sullenly.

“Dad? Are you OK?”

As soon as he heard his daughter’s voice Charles’s mood improved markedly. He announced happily, “Tracy Rae? I’m in here – I dropped the soap. Can you help me find it?”

Tracy entered the small bathroom and found her frail father standing in front of the sink, gripping the edges with both hands for stability. The bathroom was outfitted with original elements from the 1920s: a short, squat clawfoot tub, a pedestal sink, an old, five-gallon toilet – now an environmental scourge – and a stainless steel medicine cabinet with a beveled mirror mounted on the wall above the sink. The floor was tiled with tiny marble hexagons, some of which had been worn to circles in spots around the toilet and by the threshold. Tracy retrieved the bar of soap which had fallen right next to her father’s foot. She rinsed it off and placed it in her father’s hand. “I’ll be in the living room. Do you want anything from the kitchen?”

“No, dear. Be out in a jiff.”

Tracy went to the refrigerator and poured herself a glass of grapefruit juice. She also discarded a quart of milk that

had worked its way to the back of the fridge and smelled like someone threw up in it. It had been nine years since Charles Shepard had gone completely blind, and yet he still hadn't mastered the basic skills necessary to live comfortably and safely without eyesight.

Searching the kitchen cabinets for a rag to wipe up some fetid milk that had spilled onto the floor, Tracy discovered a gun – a Remington Rand M1911 semi-automatic pistol – hidden behind a cluttered tray of cooking gadgets. Unaware that her father owned a weapon, Tracy wondered whether he had acquired it recently, and if so, for what purpose. Her first thought was that he might use it to kill himself; she imagined the old man lying in bed, sightless and alone, thoroughly depressed, tolerance for life exhausted, placing the barrel against his temple and squeezing the trigger. Tracy tried to expunge the horrific image from her mind.

“What a pleasant surprise. What brings you to Inwood, Tracy Rae?”

Tracy quickly removed the oily gray gun from the drawer and placed it carefully into her pocketbook. The old man shuffled slowly into the living room, feeling his way along the wall with his fingertips, adding yet another thin layer of skin oil to the indelible smudge built up over the years. In a visible sign of the man's inherent cautiousness since going blind, he wore both a belt and suspenders.

After Tracy moved out and his wife Dorothy died, Charles struggled to maintain the spacious apartment in Morningside Heights – thinking, unrealistically in retrospect, that his daughter might one day return to live with him. Since Tracy was a tot, he dreamed that she would follow in his footsteps as a professor

at Columbia University. Not Physics, of course – that wasn't her passion – but maybe Business or Psychology. When she turned down an offer from the dean of the business school to lecture at her alma mater, and instead took a job as an assistant DA, Charles knew he'd lost her. She would never pursue a career in academia with its "publish or perish" mentality and tenure caste system once the real world beckoned her with its promise of promotions, prestige, lofty titles and outsized salaries. After Charles's sight deteriorated to the point of legal blindness, Tracy helped him find his current home in Inwood, not too far from Morningside Heights. Away from the action but still in Manhattan, as her father insisted. Perhaps the saddest thing for Charles in moving to a smaller apartment was having to part with more than half his books.

"Nothing special, Dad. Well, maybe one thing. I had a meeting with that owner of the small lab here in the City. The one I told you about that has been pioneering a cure – I mean a therapy – for RP." Charles grabbed at the air around him until he located his chair; he sat down with an audible exhale of relief. "They've made great progress so far – they're ready to go to clinical trials," Tracy exaggerated.

"Super! When will it be available?" The man's enthusiasm simultaneously heartened and saddened Tracy.

"Well, if the clinicals work out, maybe very soon." Tracy had no earthly clue how long clinical trials run, nor on what timetable the FDA would grant approval, but as she watched her father jerk his head like a lizard from side to side, attempting to pinpoint his daughter's exact whereabouts, she felt compelled to present the most optimistic outlook.

"Tell them I'll be their first volunteer. Tell them that, will

you?”

“Sure, Dad.” Tracy was going to mention the rift between the brothers that was delaying the funding of the next phase, but decided against it. To witness her father stumble around the house troubled Tracy immensely; the look of hope on his face upon hearing of the experimental drug made her feel even worse. She tried valiantly not to cry in the presence of her father, but he could tell she was distraught anyway. Perhaps he could smell the salty tears welling up?

“What’s the matter, Tracy Rae? Why so glum? I hope it’s not because of me.”

“I’m fine Dad, really. Just a couple of tough days, y’know, flying out to the West Coast and dealing with some very trying people.” Charles smiled and reached out to pat Tracy’s knee.

Tracy and her father watched an old movie, a DVD of one of his favorites – *Ace in the Hole* directed by Billy Wilder and starring Kirk Douglas. Her father loved the way Chuck Tatum, Douglas’s character, called everyone in the movie “fan.” When it was all over, after the wounded Tatum falls to the floor in front of the camera cleverly positioned there to capture his ignoble death, Tracy kissed her father goodbye. She had been debating all afternoon whether to confront her father about the gun in the drawer, deciding in the end not to. She walked down the steps and out to the waiting limo. Her driver slumbered inside. The window wiper kept three parking tickets from blowing away.

Back at her home in Sutton Place, Tracy carefully removed her father’s pistol from her pocketbook and examined it gingerly. She pinched the gun butt with her thumb and forefinger as if she were holding a dead rat by the tail. Ignorant about guns

and patently afraid to have them near, she went online to learn how to determine whether it was loaded, and if so, how to render it harmless. Because the M1911 was such a prolific weapon manufactured in high volumes in the mid-20th century, she quickly found a great deal of relevant material on the web. Irrationally fearful that the gun might spontaneously explode or fire a round, Tracy leaned away as she carefully pressed the magazine release. The empty magazine popped out onto the floor. Relieved to find the gun unloaded, she stowed it and the magazine behind a box of tampons on the top shelf in her bathroom closet.

Tracy changed clothes and connected up her laptop to the printer in her office where she printed out the PowerPoint document sent by Chad Knecht. Her desire to learn more about molecular modeling and biotechnology had grown since the first time she listened, somewhat befuddled, to Jim Torrent's presentation back at RodCone Labs. At that time she was overwhelmed by the arcane terminology and still fatigued from mediating the deal between NanoNano and PicoTech. Refreshed now, she decided to visit RodCone's website, re-examine the presentation, make notes, and, if necessary, call Fischer with any pressing questions.

As Tracy read through the material, turning aside often to Google unfamiliar terms and acronyms, she developed a better understanding of RodCone's innovations as well as a greater appreciation for the ingenuity of their approach. When she arrived at what should have been the final page, the one with nothing but a big question mark, Tracy discovered another dozen pages appended. These were not slides about eye diseases, lab experiments, and chemical reactions; these were financial

charts extracted from a complex spreadsheet and annotated with risk assessments, net present values and internal rates of return. Running along the foot of each chart were the words, “RodCone Laboratories Privileged and Confidential.”

In possession of an MBA in addition to her Columbia law degree, Tracy was well-equipped to decipher this collection of charts even as the technical portion that preceded it flew far above her head. What she gleaned from the figures was concrete evidence supporting Fletch’s suspicion that someone at RodCone had been making a concerted effort to undervalue the company. Furthermore, Tracy deciphered what she believed to be proof of outright fraud.

Tracy sat back and removed her glasses – a new Robert Marc pair purchased a month ago with a stronger prescription to correct the slow but merciless degradation of her vision. She mulled it over. *Was Fischer aware of this, or was it the renegade work of his devious Director of Business Development, Chad Dis-Knecht as Fletch called him? How would the existence of corporate fraud affect the progress on the clinical trials of the RP drug, should they ever get funded? And the most vexing question: Should I tell Fletch?*

CHAPTER EIGHT

In fewer than 90 seconds from the moment Tracy pressed the send button on her iPhone, Fletcher Cuttbate responded with an affirmative reply: yes, he would be delighted to meet her at the Gotham Bar and Grill to discuss an urgent matter. The rapid response from Fletch left Tracy with a sense of satisfaction – it was a demonstrable counterpoint to Fischer’s claim that his twin brother was a discourteous boor when it came to interacting with others. Fletch even closed his reply with “1dRfl” – *wonderful* – “to see you again.” *Such a cute, affable nerd.*

As Tracy checked farther down her inbox, she found an urgent note from Chad Knecht with another PowerPoint file attached. In the note Chad explained that he may have inadvertently sent Tracy the wrong file the previous day. He apologized for the mix-

up and asked her to discard the first file and replace it with the newer one. *Sure, pal.*

Fletch was pacing back and forth on the sidewalk outside the Gotham Bar and Grill like a lost child when Tracy, a few minutes late, strode in from the limo double parked on 12th Street. She assumed Fletch would have dropped her name and taken a table, so she was surprised to find him wandering outside the restaurant with his hands in his pockets.

Relieved at Tracy's arrival, Fletch took her hand and said, "Tracy, I am so glad to see you. I was starting to get worried. You said 12:30." He sighed heavily as though a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Out of earshot of the maître d' he chuckled, "The manager kept looking out the window at me like I was getting ready to rob the place."

Tracy glanced at her watch, an elegant Audemars Piguet timepiece that her father presented her upon graduating from the Dalton School, and marked the time at 12:40. Apparently it had taken Fletch a mere ten minutes to become concerned for her safety and well-being. Tracy was flattered. "I'm sorry, Fletch. I got held up on the FDR. Come, let's go in. You look ... nice." Fletch was dressed in a flannel shirt and a pair of khaki pants with frayed cuffs and a back pocket worn with the outline of his bulky wallet. If Tracy hadn't been a frequent patron of the clubby Village restaurant she might never have been seated accompanied by such a schlub. In contrast to Fletch's sartorial eyesore, Tracy, who had come directly from a meeting with a client on the Upper East Side, wore a sleek, navy blue Gianfranco Ferre outfit and a pair of Fendi Jardin Féérique shoes accessorized by a matching handbag that contained a copy of the mysterious financial charts with their incriminating

spreadsheets and fraudulent formulations. Elevated by the Jardin Féeriques – a pair with heels even higher than those on the Christian Louboutins she wore the morning she met Fischer at the airport – Tracy stood taller than Fletch by a good three inches.

The maître d’ escorted the odd couple to a table in the back. He held the chair for Tracy while he cast a disapproving look toward Fletch and his rank suburban garb. After the man presented menus and walked away, Fletch said, “I’m sure you already guessed this, but I’m not used to going out to nice restaurants, especially not with a well-dressed beautiful woman. I hope I’m not embarrassing you too much, Tracy.”

“Oh, Fletch.” Tracy rolled her eyes to suggest in a positive way that his assertion was off-base, that he was being far too unkind to himself. “I’m just glad you could make it on such short notice. I really felt it necessary to meet with you right away. It concerns the financials of RodCone Labs.”

Fletch displayed a quizzical expression. A waiter stepped sprightly to the table. “Pardon me, madame, sir. Would you care for sparkling, still or tap?”

Tracy looked across at Fletch with a smile, her eyebrows raised as if to ask “what would you prefer,” but when Fletch opened the menu and began to pore over its contents, Tracy responded directly to the waiter, “Still, please.”

“What’s confit?” asked Fletch, pronouncing it exactly as it appears to an unsophisticated American. The waiter intoned that “cone-FEE” is the French method of preparing salted duck legs in rendered fat; his explanation was apparently compelling, for Fletch slapped the menu shut with an audible snap and responded, “Sounds good, that’s what I’ll have. Tracy, what

about you?” Tracy hadn’t even cracked the menu yet, but she was familiar with most of the items from previous visits. She handed the waiter the menu and said with a wisp of exasperation in her voice, “I’ll have the tuna, medium rare.”

She was about to address Fletch when he beat her to it. “Before you tell me about what you found out about the lab’s finances, which, given your urgency to meet with me, must be bad news, I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your visit the other day. You really have a gift for making a person feel comfortable. I can see why you’re such a successful mediator. If I can ever be of help, you know, as a reference maybe, please let me know.” The sincerity in Fletch’s voice completely disarmed Tracy, and even though she couldn’t imagine a situation in which she would want or need a recommendation from him, she smiled back with genuine appreciation for his kind offer.

“Now, what is it you wanted to show me, Trace.” She pretended not to notice that Fletch called her “Trace,” but she liked his casual use of her name. It suggested confidence – a trait in a man that Tracy insisted upon should she ever decide to have sex with him.

Tracy removed the papers from her Fendi bag and explained how she came to be in possession of the “privileged and confidential” materials, and why, following a thorough analysis of the figures, she believed RodCone’s books were cooked. She mentioned in passing her MBA degree to lend credibility to her assertions. “I don’t know who at RodCone worked up the numbers or perpetrated the fraud, but I can say with confidence that your gut feelings about the company valuations were right.”

“I didn’t know you have an MBA, Trace. That’s impressive. Where from?”

Tracy was surprised that Fletch didn't seem very disturbed by the ominous news she'd just delivered. "Uh, Columbia ... aren't you worried, Fletch? What are you going to do?"

Out of the corner of his eye he spotted the waiter arriving with a tray of food. "What am I going to do? Eat lunch with you, of course."

"Seriously, Fletch. I'm concerned for you, and for the cure. Maybe you should hire a lawyer and a forensic accountant before the enterprise folds up and you lose everything."

The waiter presented Tracy an artistically arranged plate of seared yellowfin tuna propped against caponata rolled within savory pappardelle, and to Fletch, the risotto with sweet turnips and duck confit.

Fletch replied, "You're right. I'll place a call to my lawyer. As you know I've been suspicious. Now with these charts and your interpretation, I have the proof I need."

"Fletch ... ?"

As he folded the charts and stuffed them into his distressed back pocket, Fletch interrupted, "Don't worry – I won't tell anyone how I got the information. Not even Fischer. I only hope he's not involved. That would disappoint me tremendously ... but not surprise me. When I was a little boy, my mother confided to me that I was the first born – it was *my* foot that popped out first, she said. Mama told me I was her Esau and Fischer was her Jacob. She told me Fischer 'grasped my heel,' if you get my meaning." Fletch enclosed the phrase "grasped my heel" in quotes formed by his fingers. "What a prescient mind she had." Tracy nodded as if she understood, but in fact she was perplexed. *Grasped his heel?* She noted Fletch's subdued reaction to the potentially dire news. It was the complete opposite of how

a cutthroat business executive would react. His composure and calm demeanor in the face of betrayal was an unexpected and, honestly, a refreshing departure from the type-A outbursts to which Tracy was routinely exposed during heated negotiations involving corporate bigshots and their cretinous assistants. Such a refreshing frame of mind.

Tracy placed a luscious piece of fatty tuna into her mouth. The crisp texture of the seared exterior pleasantly offset the soft flavor of the cool tuna flesh. She watched as Fletcher attacked his duck leg like an unskilled carpenter, hacking and sawing with the fine silverware. Tracy feared he might knock over his water glass with his energetic cutting motion. She debated whether to reach across the table and move the glass aside. Instead, in a move to distract Fletch away from his vigorous task, Tracy remarked, “I couldn’t help noticing the unique-looking painting in your den, Fletch. It reminds me of Frida Kahlo’s work. Did you paint it?”

As she hoped, Fletch put down the silverware and responded, “Yeah. You like it?”

“Very intriguing.”

“I know it looks like I copied her style – because I did. More or less. But I like to think of it more as a tribute than a ripoff. After Mama got the retinitis, and I became more involved in studying eye diseases, I acquired a greater appreciation for the pain of blindness. That’s what I was trying to capture on the canvas. As you can probably tell, I’ve only been painting with oils for a few years.”

“From my quick study of it, I would say it was very well executed.”

“I bet you know a lot about art, Tracy. Do you have a favorite artist?”

Tracy had to be careful now not to descend into a conceited diatribe about her expertise in early 20th century art, in particular the works of Egon Schiele, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Gustav Klimt, Franz Marc, Lyonel Feininger and a host of Bauhaus artists. She was a benefactor of the Whitney and the Guggenheim, and sat on advisory boards for both institutions. In the late 1990s, Tracy had been called in quietly to mediate the return of a Schiele watercolor, an austere depiction of a nude woman outlined in heavy black crayon that had been confiscated by the Nazis from its rightful Jewish owners. Tracy would mention none of this to Fletcher at this time, lest she appear a braggart.

“I guess I would say ...” – *should I name someone well-known?* – “... Wassily Kandinsky.”

“Who?”

Just as Tracy feared, by naming someone other than Da Vinci, Michelangelo, or Rembrandt, she would have to explain.

“Uh, Kandinsky? He was a Russian artist. I have one of his paintings.” She sipped her water.

Fletcher smiled and nodded his head. Tracy couldn’t tell for sure whether or not he was impressed, but when he picked up the silverware and resumed hacking the duck leg, she concluded he was not.

“Kandinsky? I’m going to look him up. Maybe sometime I can see your painting.”


“Sure, that’d be great. I think you’ll find his work exhilarating.”

Fletcher lifted his glass of still water and gestured toward Tracy who did likewise.

“Thanks for being so kind to me, Tracy.”

She didn’t know how to react, so she tapped her glass against his and declared, “To the success of the cure.”

CHAPTER NINE

 outside the antiseptic steel-and-glass high-rise office building in Midland, Texas, on the sidewalk, in the shade, the temperature hovered just above 105 degrees – and it was only a minute past 11 in the morning. Tracy had stepped outside to get some air, not that it was fresh or even especially breathable, but after 27 straight hours trapped in a grueling mediation session, she needed to escape. If anyone uttered the arcane terms “pyrolysis” or “retorting” one more time she might scream. Tracy had been in this western town in the Lone Star State for almost a week, trying to bridge a chasm separating the two Texans jousting over rights to vast and valuable shale-oil deposits. It had not been the piece of cake she expected. In an effort to unjam the deadlock she insisted that neither party retire for the evening and instead plow through

to a conclusion, much the way a trial judge will sequester an irreconcilably split jury overnight in a fleabag motel, cut off from telephone and TV, and in some cases, toothpaste and toothbrush. Incarceration under such decidedly bleak conditions has a marvelous way of conjuring consensus out of the most argumentative souls. The jurors moan and groan over the shitty conditions, but none steps out of line when it comes time to render a unanimous verdict the next morning.

Tracy's gambit to keep the Texans overnight like bratty children in detention had paid off. An arrangement that had been rejected out of hand by both parties four days earlier, essentially a barter of mineral-rights in exchange for access to retorting facilities, had suddenly on the fifth day of talks become mutually satisfactory. Tracy found it amusing that the final terms that both men accepted were the same as a proposal floated in the first two hours on the very first day of the mediation. But she understood: every tough negotiation must go through a process of macho posturing and horn-locking, even if the final position is identical to the original.

On the hot sidewalk, Tracy lovingly smoked a cigarette – a habit she indulged only after closing deals and making love – and like a hyper-kinetic tiger confined in a small cage, paced around within the narrow, designated smoking section. She checked her iPhone for messages. Near the top was an email sent by someone from RodCone Laboratories; in the subject line: “Please call.” Believing it to be from Fischer Cuttbate, Tracy hesitated. Perhaps he was calling to interrogate her about the mistakenly-sent financial data, or to quiz her on her recent conversations with twin brother Fletch. Tracy finished her cigarette, crushed the butt with her well-defined, fashionably-clad foot, and reentered

the building where the air was a few degrees warmer than a refrigerated dairy case. The sudden clutch of brisk air convulsed Tracy to a sneezing fit. She sat in a low-slung Barcelona chair positioned orthogonally in front of a square granite pool of smooth water, and placed a call to RodCone Laboratories. A woman answered. “RodCone Laboratories. How may I help you?”

“This is Tracy Shepard. Someone there sent me an email requesting that I call?”

“Oh, yes. Thank you, Mrs. Shepard. It’s been a hectic day. Let me check my notes.” *On hold.* Insidious music played, the tune repeating every 25 seconds. A minute went by, then another minute, then five minutes. *What the hell?* Tracy was just about to hang up and take the elevator back to the 14th floor conference room when the receptionist came back on the line.

“OK, Mrs.... uh ...”

“Mrs. Shepard.” *For Christ sake ...*

“Yes. I’m afraid we won’t be able to remit the money for your bill. The one for \$5,000 for ... let me see ... for ‘alternative dispute mediation’? You sent us an invoice last week – well, I’m afraid we can’t pay it.”

“Why not?”

“We can’t pay for anything right now. The FBI raided our company on Monday and froze our accounts.”

Tracy leaned forward on the low-slung Barcelona chair, dumbfounded.

“Mrs. Shepard?”

“Yes, yes. I’m still here. What happened? What’s going on? Let me talk to Fischer ... Mr. Cuttbate. I’m a friend of his.”

“No one knows where he is. Mr. Cuttbate disappeared before

the FBI came in. So did Mr. Knecht. The FBI thinks they may have left the country.”

“Left the country? I don’t ... I mean ...” Tracy fell silent, trying to comprehend what it all meant. Finally, she noted rather lamely, “Well, if he comes in have him call me.”

The receptionist replied snidely, “If Mr. Cuttbate comes in Mrs. Shepard, the only person he’ll be able to call is his lawyer. Money is missing and the creditors are very upset. One of our biggest suppliers is here right now talking to the FBI.” Tracy could hear the sound of a phone ringing in the background. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Shepard, I have to go.” *Click.*

Tracy stared at her iPhone as though it were a sacred oracle that had just gone silent, leaving the natives in the dark. “Holy shit,” Tracy muttered to herself.

Standing directly behind her, one of the Texans involved in the shale-oil dispute inquired, “‘Holy shit’ what, Tracy?”

The man’s sudden appearance startled Tracy. She wheeled around and bolted upright from the Barcelona chair. “Arnold! How long’ve you been standin’ there? Ya’ll shouldn’t sneak up on a woman like that.” ... *like thay-ett.* Influenced by total immersion in the patois of the dusty Texans, Tracy unconsciously spoke with an affected Southern lilt.

“I jus’ wanted to say ‘thank ya’ll’ fer yer hard work, and yer even harder hard-ball tactics. Ya’ll got quite a pair for a lady. If someone a tol’ me last week that today I’d be shakin’ hands with that Yankee carpetbagger, I woulda shit in his hat. But it’s a good deal. Smart. I can’t wait to see your bill!” The man from Midland laughed heartily.

Tracy chuckled along as well, and when the man’s laughing morphed into a coughing fit she rapped on his back in a

display of concern, although she considered the intervention superfluous. When the Texan caught his breath and his chortling diminished, he and Tracy engaged in some mandatory small talk, but she could not park her concerns about RodCone Labs into an empty corner of her mind. As soon as the man left – after Tracy weaseled her way out of having dinner with him on his ranch, the BAR-69, a place that sounded suspiciously more like Plato’s Retreat than the OK Corral – she called Fletch. Her call went straight to voicemail. Tracy tried several more times on her ride to Midland Airport, and again when she landed in New York. Tracy even considered traveling to Hamilton Square and showing up unannounced at Fletch’s bungalow – that’s how determined she was to learn what was going on at the lab. But after careful consideration she abandoned the notion of prying into RodCone’s affairs. Surely one or both of the Cuttbate boys would call her soon enough.

Back home, after a bumpy flight through a vigorous jet stream, Tracy infused her bath water with fragrant oils in anticipation of a long soak, and contemplated her next assignment: mediating a three-way dispute involving Bradley, a promising college football player, his agent Milton, and representatives of the owners of the New York Jets. This would be a grueling job and she couldn’t allow herself to be distracted by the foibles of a tiny biotech company, even one that had dedicated itself to tackling a disease that afflicted her father – and maybe herself someday. Her recently-purchased prescription glasses already seemed less effective than they were when she first picked them up.

Tracy stretched out in her long bathtub, a damp towel draped across her brow. She relaxed with a glass of iced Cointreau, enjoying the soothing gentle jets of water massaging her arms

and thighs. Out of the blue she chuckled as she recalled the name of the New York Jet's owner: Woody Johnson. The first time she heard it, Tracy adamantly refused to believe it. *Woody Johnson?* It was the nickname Tracy had lewdly given to her first dildo when she was an 18-year-old Columbia University freshman living on her own.

CHAPTER TEN

Before she headed out for an introductory meeting with Milton, the whiny sports agent who had until recently represented an up-and-coming college gridder – and who now considered himself a deeply aggrieved victim of duplicity – Tracy sorted through her US mail. Among a pile of official-looking envelopes from banks and insurance companies, some containing plastic facsimiles of credit cards defying the recipient to discard them without opening, Tracy picked out a hand-addressed letter. It was postmarked Trenton. Inside was a two-page hand-written letter from Fletch Cuttbate and a check for \$5,000.

Fletch explained that on her recommendation he had hired a forensic accountant to analyze the secret charts, and, when there were no doubts, he called in the FBI to investigate. He

wanted to believe the fraud at RodCone Laboratories had taken place under the nose of his unwitting brother, but following Fischer's sudden disappearance it seemed increasingly likely his twin had indeed perpetrated it. Fletch added that RodCone's office manager informed him that a number of accounts payable would go into arrears after the FBI froze the firm's assets, including the fee for Tracy's mediation work.

The letter stated, "I simply cannot in good conscience allow you to suffer financially because of RodCone's current misfortunes. Please accept the enclosed personal check from me for \$5,000 to cover the fee that you and my brother agreed to. You've shown me true friendship and treated me with dignity, and for that I shall always be grateful. And it's in that spirit of friendship that I ask you now to meet me again. I have some news, something exciting and highly sensitive, that I want to share with you. Would you have dinner with me at Per Se? My treat! I've done some reading and it looks like a pretty nice restaurant. It took a lot of perseverance to get a reservation – I hope you can join me next Friday at 8."

Tracy didn't know what to make of it all. Normally, she would take it as a sign of sheer, inexcusable egotism for a man to make a dinner reservation without first inquiring whether his prospective date was interested and available. The presumption that she had nothing better to do than to wait around for his invitation smacked of arrogance. But she took no offense to Fletch's methods; she already knew he was a bit of an eccentric, and unconventional in his approach to relationships. Tracy really liked him, and as she got to know him better, she wanted to spend more quality time with him. *Per Se. A pretty nice restaurant.* She snickered. If any of the snobs Tracy knew made such an

understatement she would take it as a poor attempt at sarcasm, but coming from Fletch it had the mark of a genuine musing by a simple man. In reality, Per Se was one of the most exclusive – and expensive – restaurants in Manhattan, an icon of culinary perfection boasting a nine-course chef’s tasting menu for \$275 per person. Reservations were tough to come by. Tracy had eaten there but once, and she had wanted to return many times over the past couple years.

Should I cash Fletch’s check and accept his invitation to dinner? Without hesitation Tracy answered her question: *Maybe, and yes!*

Tracy took the elevator to the ground floor, walked past the Beefeater, hiked her skirt above her knees and stepped with a long, elegant stride off the curb into the awaiting limo. She was in a fantastic mood – no whiny sports agent named Milton and his sordid tale of treachery and prevarication would bring her down today.

A few minutes before 8 on Friday, Tracy arrived at the Time Warner Building where, surprisingly, some very fine restaurants are located, including the four-star rated Per Se. Surprising because nothing about the interior of the Time Warner Building suggested world-class cuisine was served within its confines. The vaulted atrium could pass for any nondescript, suburban, mid-western Galleria Mall. It was a place completely devoid of authentic ambiance, a place where one might expect to find a Fuddruckers or a Dave & Busters.

Fletcher Cuttbate paced around in the lobby, waiting for his date to arrive. Tracy almost passed him by – she had come to the building fully expecting him to be dressed like a gardener or an elementary school teacher. Instead Fletch wore a crisp navy blue

Valentino suit that fit remarkably well, a pale, pink spread-collar shirt, and a conservative blue tie splashed with tiny red dots. Inspired by Tracy's affection for quality footwear Fletch wore a pair of Italian shoes hand-crafted in soft grained calf-skin. Just like brother Fischer, Fletcher's work sometimes required him to look like a million bucks.

"Hi Tracy."

"Fletch? Wow – you look great. I'm ..." – she was about to say "stunned" – "... impressed. Very sharp."

Fletch did a full 360 like a pretty-boy runway model to give his date a view of all the glory, and then laughed at his own feigned pomposity. "Needless to say – but I'll say it anyway – you look gorgeous Trace. I hope you'll like the restaurant I picked out."

Tracy looped her arm underneath Fletch's, and as they walked toward the elevator together, she replied, "I know I will."

This time around, Fletch's table manners were more refined. Fletch revealed that he had felt awkward during their previous meal together at the Gotham Bar and Grill and in an effort to perform more admirably the next time, he went online to bone up on dating etiquette and how to behave in a high-end restaurant. Tracy recommended a bottle of wine – expensive, of course, but not astronomical – and Fletch ordered it, as he did for both Tracy's and his meal selections. That's what the website said: "A gentleman always orders for his date."

Tracy was champing at the bit to learn more about the fates of RodCone Labs and the fugitive Fischer Cuttbate, but she decided to ease into the subject slowly. She told Fletch all about her successful mediation of the big shale-oil affair, and of having an initial meeting with a sports agent for some high-flying college fullback or tailback or hunchback recruited by the New York

Jets. Fletch confided that he was a Dallas Cowboys fan, and for that had taken unending grief from his friends and associates in New York and New Jersey. The waiter brought out the first of five courses on the *prix fixe* menu: chilled carrot soup for Fletch, sabayon of oysters and caviar for Tracy. The conversation wended off into some trivial small-talk, and during a lengthy moment of silence, Tracy finally mustered the courage to ask, “Where do you think Fischer went? What’s going to happen to the lab – and all the RP research?”

“I honestly don’t know, Trace. Deep down Fischer is a good man – you probably sensed that. I’m pretty sure he instinctively went on the lam without thinking of the consequences, but who knows. I think he got in over his head, and that that bastard Dis-Knecht exploited his kindness and trust. But now it probably doesn’t make any difference how things happened – whether Fischer was a dupe or the mastermind. In the end he participated in fraud. Fischer is a fugitive and if he resurfaces or is caught, he’ll probably do time.”

Tracy just shook her head. It was an unfamiliar scenario. “I can’t believe it. I suppose the drive to complete the clinical trials warped his judgment.” She wanted to believe in Fischer Cuttbate, once a candidate for White Knighthood.

Fletch added, “Fischer traveled all the time, going around the world seeking funding for the company, making presentations to the medical community, meeting with colleagues, going to conventions. He could easily have gone into hiding in a foreign country – maybe staying with some sympathetic scientist friend ... This carrot soup is really good.”

Tracy continued to eat her sabayon, nodding to Fletch as he spoke, coaxing him to continue.

“Anyway, all this drama throws RodCone Labs into Limbo. Uh ... you know what Limbo is supposed to be, don’t you?”

Tracy the former Catholic chuckled, “Oh yeah.” She made some ethereal whale-like sounds and waved her arms as though she were floating in space. Her chuckle, fortified by the wine, morphed into a full-fledged cackle. Fletch laughed along and when the humor seemed to dissipate, he continued, “Our assets are frozen for now and the creditors will probably start legal action. Those VCs that Fischer was courting are running for the exits, which is fine with me. As you know, I never trusted those vultures anyway. I’m hopeful though that the company will survive this episode ... in some form. We’ll bring in fresh management and get a better accounting firm.” Fletch took a sip of wine, a solid \$120 per bottle Zinfandel, one of the least-expensive choices on the Bible-sized list.

Tracy dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin and said, “You’re amazing, Fletch. You’re so calm. How do you do it? If it was me, and my company was in deep trouble, and my brother was on the lam, I’d be going crazy. How can you stay so tranquil, so optimistic?” An invisible waiter removed the plates and the silverware from the table while another apparition refilled the water glasses. Moments later the second course arrived. Throughout the evening the service proceeded in this manner – unobtrusive removal and replacement quietly and flawlessly executed. Although Per Se had only 16 tables, the waitstaff numbered in the dozens.

“Why am I so optimistic?” Fletch smiled and picked up a tiny fork forged with one tine broader than the others. “I’ll tell you why. I’ll tell you because I trust you.” By the time the waiters removed the dishes for the fifth and final time, and another

dutifully scraped the crumbs from the linen tablecloth, Tracy sat across the table from Fletch spellbound. It had been hours since the couple first arrived at Per Se, but Fletch's compelling story had made it seem like minutes. She was flattered to be trusted enough to receive the secret.

After Fischer had become increasingly insistent that his brother agree to the intervention of the West Coast venture capitalists and their money, Fletch started to suspect something was amiss. His paranoia spiked at the possibility that his share of RodCone Lab's ownership could be diluted by the investments of these cutthroats. Additionally, knowing that Fischer and his management team were pursuing a retinitis pigmentosa therapy instead of a straightforward cure further irritated and alienated him. Therefore, in the background, away from the scrutiny of his brother and the other RodCone officers, Fletch collaborated with a fellow biochemist on a cure for RP using the models and equations he showed Tracy the day she came to his bungalow in Hamilton Square – the ones scratched into a simple notebook. The scientists scrounged up free access time on university supercomputers and conducted research on live swine at the agricultural laboratories at Penn State.

Fletch explained to Tracy that progress had been promising, and that the two men had redoubled their efforts, working 18 hour days, seven days a week. For this reason, Fletch had been scarce around RodCone, leading Fischer to conclude his hermit brother had become disinterested in the day-to-day operations of the company. Tracy recalled what Fish had told her about Fletch on the plane back from Los Angeles: "He never gets involved in the daily operations and rarely talks to me. I haven't seen him in three months." Now it made sense: the secret work

was all-consuming.

“You see, Trace, the cure is real. It’s not entombed in a bunch of theoretical equations as I portrayed to you before. The cure is ready for clinical trial – right now. And I’m confident we’ll get through those with flying colors and through FDA approval as well. I hope you can forgive me for not being more forthcoming when we first discussed it.”

Tracy was truly enthralled. The couple was into their third bottle of wine, most of which had been consumed by Tracy who drank ever more expeditiously as Fletch’s story unfolded and took shape. She imagined the expression of joy on her father’s face when she revealed to him that a cure – *an actual cure* – to his affliction was just around the corner. She enthusiastically related to Fletch, “My dad wants to be a guinea pig for the cure,” joking a bit but hoping that Fletch would say something like, “Sure, why not?”

“Sure, why not,” replied Fletch with a toothy grin.

Tracy reached across the table and touched his hand gently, and then upon further consideration cast a look of concern. “Fletch, how are you going to pay for the clinical trials?” The venture capitalists that had so eagerly offered to bankroll the trials of RodCone’s RP therapy were now out of the picture, angered and disillusioned by Fischer’s impropriety.

Fletcher responded confidently, “After our father died, in addition to leaving Fish and me half of the RodCone business, he also bequeathed each of us a half million dollars, bonds mostly but also some stocks and cash. Predictably, Fish spent most of his inheritance on toys – a speed-boat, fancy artwork, nice furniture. I, on the other hand, denied myself all the usual creature comforts and invested my share. You’ve seen my dumpy

house – would you believe I have more than two million dollars in the bank right now?”

“Really? That’s fantastic.” Tracy finished her glass of wine and with that, the waiter removed the third spent bottle of the evening. Tracy ordered a Cognac. Fletch, practiced in the art of pounding Wild Turkey and other high-proof distilled spirits, was impressed with Tracy’s capacity to imbibe, and asked the waiter to bring two snifters. “Two million dollars. So, you’re ready to go to clinical ... uh ... clim ... er, clinical trial, then? Congratsulations, Fletch.”

“Oh no, Trace – I need another mil. It’ll cost at least three million. I have to hire some people, buy insurance, post a bond, comply with a boatload of FDA bureaucracy.” Fletch took a big slug of Cognac, knocking his head back in one swift motion like that of a seasoned dive bar denizen. At Per Se’s prices, the mouthful of aperitif totaled to about 18 bucks. “That’s why I’m reluctantly meeting with another vulture capitalist firm tomorrow.” He shook his head like people do when they know they’re about to admit folly. “I’m worried, though; worried they’ll take over the operation just like Fischer’s people wanted to do with RodCone Labs.” For the first time this evening Tracy sensed a bit of dejection in Fletch’s mood. He slumped a bit and stared off as he rolled the snifter of Cognac back and forth on the tablecloth perpendicularly along its side, coating the interior surface of the glass. It was a move he read about on the internet.

The bill came to \$875 with tax, tip excluded. Tracy made a perfunctory move to reach across the table for the bill, nearly knocking over the vase of flowers, but Fletch grabbed it. “Uh, uh, Trace – nice try, but this is my treat.” Tracy giggled and sat back. She was still working on her Cognac, positive now that she

had over-indulged by a wide margin. She was light-headed and her face felt hot.

As Fletch leaned onto his left butt cheek to retrieve his wallet, he said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“You jus’ did,” laughed Tracy.

“Huh? Oh, I get it.”

“Sorry – what is it, Fletch?” Tracy giggled some more.

“How do you keep your legs in such beautiful shape? You must work out, or swim a lot. Do you do that thing ... that thing ... oh, what the hell is it called? Pilates?” He pronounced it “plotties.” Fletch dug ten one-hundred dollar bills out of his wallet. “You have the most gorgeous legs I’ve ever seen. And your feet ...”

Tracy, caught off guard by the blunt and unanticipated inquiry, stammered a bit before responding. “Well, uh, thank you, Fletch. I try. I’m ... I’m ... I’m glad you noticed.” Her face flushed even more, and she enjoyed a private tingle. She looked down like a shy schoolgirl and awkwardly examined a fingernail. It was a rare occasion that Tracy – in control at all times – found herself in such unfamiliar territory, off guard. After a moment, she pushed her hair away from her eyes and smiled at Fletch. “Ready to go?”

The couple strolled around the periphery of Central Park just across Columbus Circle from Per Se, talking and laughing. Tracy touched Fletch’s shoulder. He turned toward her and looked up into her somewhat glassy eyes. Without saying a word, she kissed him on the lips. “Would you like to see my apartment in Sutton Place?”

Rolling around naked in her king-sized four-poster bed, Tracy and Fletch maneuvered from the tried-and-true missionary

position, to doggy-style, and then into the tasty sixty-nine. Fletch was glad he had rubbed one out before his date with Tracy; hours later he was better prepared to curtail the scourge of premature ejaculation. Like a depiction from the Kama Sutra, Fletch lay atop Tracy, tonguing her engorged clit and admiring her well-attended pudenda, completely bereft of hair. So smooth – not a shred of evidence of irritation from shaving or waxing. He had already lost one bet with himself – her nipples were chocolate-brown, not pink – and now another, for he had envisioned Tracy with a small, trimmed triangle of downy fur.

Tracy was sucking Fletcher’s cock energetically when she suddenly pulled back and burst out laughing. “Oh my God! Seven is my lucky number. Where did you ever ... ?”

Startled at first by Tracy’s outburst, Fletch looked back at her over his shoulder, and then when he understood the cause of her amusement he laughed along with her. He swiveled around and lay next to Tracy as he recalled the time back in high school when he was goaded by some friends after a long night of partying into having his balls tattooed with a pair of dice: a three and a four. “We’d just left a Lou Reed concert and were walking, or more like stumbling, down the sidewalk. Man, was I wasted. There was a 24-hour tattoo parlor – a brightly lit joint next to a liquor store. One of my buddies told the tattoo guy to give me snake-eyes, but I protested. Not about getting a tattoo, but about getting snake-eyes.” Fletch chuckled and added, “I can’t remember much of it, to be honest, but I think I said something like ‘snake-eyes means craps – y’know, a loser – and my wiener is a winner’.” Tracy laughed hysterically. Then when the funny moment passed, she demanded with mock authority, “You’ve rested long enough, mister – give me more.”

In her completely inebriated condition, Tracy climbed onto Fletch's pole and rode it reverse-cowgirl style and then cowgirl. Fletch struggled to maintain – he knew he would cum any second. He grasped Tracy's thighs in an attempt to moderate the pace of her love-making. Tracy wriggled and rocked rhythmically, trembling and moaning in ecstasy. Her face and chest were flush and rosy. She let out a scream, and that was it for Fletch. He squirted a long stream of cum up Tracy's back and into the crack of her ass. She bent forward and rested her torso upon Fletch's. The two breathed heavily and in unison, saying nothing for several minutes.

When Tracy recovered a bit, she sat up and faced Fletch who was still lying on his back, his forearm positioned across his eyes. She grasped his cock with her beautiful, sexy feet. He stiffened within seconds. Her podiatric manipulation of his penis was superior to any handjob Fletch had ever experienced, including those he performed on himself. Fletch ejaculated onto Tracy's long, professionally pedicured toes, spattering her toenails – ten miniature works of emery board art, tapered perfectly and painted in slick mauve lacquer. Cum trickled slowly like maple syrup down Tracy's feet and onto her ankles, coursing through the runnels formed by her phalanx and metatarsal bones. Tracy's fine footjob, a first for Fletch, was one of the most erotic episodes he had ever experienced. If he had to die right there, it would be OK with him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The following morning, as Tracy lay in bed motionless, suffering from a powerful hangover, Fletch tiptoed quietly out of the bathroom fully dressed, including the tie. He had wakened early, shit, showered and shaved. Tracy thoughtfully left a razor and a brand new toothbrush for him on the sink the previous evening. Outside, the sky was just beginning to lighten. Unlike its usual similarity to a NASCAR event, at this hour the FDR Drive looked more like a scenic rural parkway on a Sunday afternoon.

Tracy rolled onto her right side and faced the bathroom, groaning in agony. “Fletch? What ... are you doing?”

“Good morning, Tracy. I didn’t mean to waken you. How do you feel?”

“Ugh ... terrible. I never should’ve had that Cognac.” Tracy

sat up, then abruptly lay back down, disoriented by the sensation of a whirling head. “Ooh ... I feel awful.”

Fletch noticed the tell-tale signs of imminent gastric disgorgement and nonchalantly stepped away from the bathroom door to clear an unobstructed path to the toilet for Tracy which she presently traversed in a desperate attempt to throw up with dignity, door closed and toilet flushing to mask the sound of hideous retching. After ten minutes, Tracy, licking her lips and looking ashen, slowly baby-stepped back into the bedroom. Fletch was waiting for her with a glass of ice water.

“I’m sorry you feel so bad, Tracy. Let me help you back to bed.” He took her arm and steadied her. Tracy smiled weakly.

“I’ll be OK. Just let me rest in the lounge chair by the window. Would you open it for me, please?” Fletch situated Tracy by the window and lifted the sill a few inches. Cool air poured in and Tracy drew a cleansing breath. Fletch brought over the glass of water and some aspirins, and placed a cold, damp cloth across her brow. Tracy tried to relax and remain still. With the back of his hand Fletch caressed her cheek and said, “I had a wonderful evening. Thanks for spending it with me. I’ll call you later and let you know how my meeting with the VCs went.”

Tracy quickly removed the wet cloth and looked up at Fletch. She had forgotten he was scheduled to meet with a new group of venture capitalists today – a group that would undoubtedly drive a hard bargain clothed as a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.” Although Fletch had articulated on several occasions his mistrust of venture capitalists, Tracy feared he might topple under their pressure to accept a Trojan Horse. She asked with concern in her voice, “When is your meeting with them, Fletch?”

“Three o’clock, at the Marriott Marquis.”

“I’d like to go with you. Just as an observer. Or maybe an advisor.”

Relieved at the prospect that Tracy would come to his rescue, Fletch blurted, “Really?” and then believing he might have reacted too selfishly, toned it down. “I mean, that’s OK, Trace. You don’t have to do that – I can manage. Besides, you don’t feel well.” Tracy sensed Fletch wanted badly for her to accompany him. He was ill-prepared to negotiate with greedy, professional financiers, and he knew it. She worried that in his desperation to advance the RP cure he would cut a terrible deal and wind up with a nominal interest in the proceeds from the drug and any derivative products. The VCs would no doubt position themselves to take control of the entire RodCone enterprise, and in the process, shelve the cure in favor of developing a therapy, just as the previous group was poised to do.

“I’ll feel better by 3.”

“Are you sure? I can handle it.”

No you can’t. “I’m sure you can. Still though, I’d like to come to the Marriott at 2 to prep for the meeting. In the meantime, I’ll try to get some sleep.”

Fletch smiled with respect and admiration for Tracy; she smiled back with affection and satisfaction.

The meeting with the venture capitalists, a trio of loud, arrogant men in their 40s and 50s each dressed in a dark suit and armed with reams of market data, unfolded pretty much the way Tracy predicted it would. Right away the men tried to throw Fletch off balance by claiming his drug was highly speculative, the market opportunity was sketchy, and his lab operations were woefully substandard. The VCs argued that to assume such a

large risk they would have to structure a deal guaranteeing a suitably commensurate reward should the drug become a success, which in their opinion was unlikely. Without saying so directly, the VCs wanted to be in a position to control every aspect of the operation – marketing strategy, R&D budgeting, product pricing, advertising campaigns, hiring and firing. They expected to be granted seats on the board and majority share ownership.

The eldest among them, a squat, bald man with manicured fingernails and impeccable taste in clothing, pressed Fletch to explain why RodCone Labs was developing a cure for retinitis pigmentosa when the more lucrative strategy was to market a therapy that would drive perpetual sales. Having opposed such thinking for so long, Fletch angrily slapped his palm on the table and appeared ready to walk out of the conference room that the VCs had reserved for the afternoon. Tracy gently reached for Fletch's arm and coaxed him back into his seat. Then she took control of the meeting.

“Development of a cure for RP is non-negotiable. Period. No life-long therapy. That's not the objective of the company.”

“And why, may I ask, Mrs. Shepard, is that not the objective?” replied the bald man. Tracy couldn't help noticing that his fingernails seemed to have been carefully filed and polished with a clear lacquer.

“A cure is the right thing to do ...”

The three men laughed derisively.

“... and the clinical trials for a cure will cost significantly less than the trials for a perpetual therapy. The time to market will be reduced by a factor of two. The risk of competitive encroachment will be virtually eliminated. Get it?”

The men stopped smiling. The guy in charge of facts and figures stammered as he glanced at his colleagues and rummaged through his charts and tables, “Well ... I’m not so sure ... I don’t know ... about that ...”

The bald man interjected, “OK, look. You’re the scientific expert Mr. Cuttbate. We’re just simple financiers. Far be it from us to tell you how to conduct research and development. If you think a cure is a better play than a therapy, so be it.”

Fletch looked over at Tracy and smiled at the display of her business acumen. She remained stoned faced, refusing to look at Fletch. Bad for negotiations to appear too satisfied too soon.

The man continued, “So, Mr. Cuttbate – do we have a deal? Or at least the foundation for a deal?”

Fletch was about to respond in the affirmative when Tracy spoke up, “We’ll take it under consideration. That’s all.”

Tracy stood up abruptly and extended her hand, indicating to everyone’s surprise that the meeting was over. She knew the deal was terrible for Fletch, and she knew he would have gone for it. And rather than continue the negotiation – which she knew would result in an unsatisfactory deal – Tracy summarily concluded the discussion, for she had an alternate proposal to present to Fletcher Cuttbate.

After the three men filed out of the conference room grumbling and visibly annoyed, Tracy said to Fletch who was also in a state of semi-shock at the sudden dissolution of the meeting, “Those people are just like the VCs your brother tried to bring into RodCone. You were smart to nix the deal then, and you’d be smart to do it again. There was no upside for you and your company in any of their proposals.”

She half-expected Fletch to get pissy over her hijacking of the meeting, and she believed he would have been justified. But instead he asked sincerely, “What do you suggest, Tracy? Where am I going to get the funds to go on?”

Tracy replied proudly, “From me, Fletch. Let me be your angel investor. You have a couple million, you need another million. Well, I’ve got a million. What do you say?”

Fletch was taken aback. He hesitated for a few seconds while he studied Tracy’s face for clues to her motivation. “You? You would loan me the money?”

“No, Fletch, not loan. Invest. I would take an equity position. If you’re interested, we’ll assemble our lawyers to work out a mutually beneficial arrangement.” Stating it as she did – *assemble our lawyers, mutually beneficial arrangement* – Tracy noted how she never strayed far from her base as a professional arbitrator and negotiator. At this point in her life it was second nature.

“I don’t know what to say ... I’m speechless.” His eyes welled. For a moment, Tracy thought Fletch might cry like he almost did that day at his bungalow.

Before the conversation became maudlin, Tracy added, “Remember, Fletch, I expect to make money on the cure, too.” She felt it necessary to articulate this fact – not just to clarify her role as a dispassionate investor, but also to dispel any notion that she was treating him as a charity case.

“Of course, of course.” Fletch was giddy now. “I’ll call my lawyer right away – how about tomorrow?”

“Let’s make it next week, Fletch. I have to check on my guy’s availability.”

“Whatever you say, Trace. Say, how would you like to have a celebratory drink with me?”

“Now? It’s only 5.”

Fletch shrugged a “so-what” shrug. Tracy grimaced, and then chuckled, “Oh, what the hell. I’ve pretty much recovered from last night. Where would you like to go?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The following Thursday, Tracy took the limo to the cluttered offices of RodCone Laboratories on 17th Street after picking up her lawyer along the way. She rode the tiny elevator to the second floor and walked to the glass door upon which the words “RodCone Laboratories” were stenciled in Narkisim font. Other than the office manager who a month earlier escorted Tracy to the same conference room to receive the presentation on the RP therapy, no other employees were present. Fischer Cuttbate and Chad Knecht were still missing, presumably on the lam, and Jim Torrent had been fired by Fletch. The few remaining scientists on the payroll were furloughed after the company’s accounts were frozen by the FBI. Fletch hoped a quick infusion of cash would allow him to bring at least one or two back before they landed new jobs elsewhere.

Tracy entered the conference room ahead of her lawyer. Fletch stood up from the table and buttoned his suit jacket – a rumpled tweed number, its fabric thinned out on the elbows. Tracy half-wondered if he had rented the stylish outfit he wore at Per Se.

“Tracy. So nice to see you again.” Trying to appear businesslike, he shook her hand. “Let me introduce you to Arthur Andrews, my accountant, and Bernard Zwiebel, my attorney.” Tracy acknowledged the men and likewise introduced her lawyer, Hannah Goldman – the girl she out-manuevered to become director of the Dalton high school play almost 30 years ago. As Fletch led Tracy to a seat at the conference table he detected the telltale scent of Van Cleef & Arpels. So lovely. And her feet? Shod in Jimmy Choo mules; her exposed flesh was tanned, taut and smooth. Fletch summoned the totality of his willpower not to ogle them, for to do so would undoubtedly lead to embarrassing arousal.

The murinoid accountant explained that RodCone Labs had filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy and would be liquidated. A newly-formed corporation, Cuttbate Associates, would purchase the key assets of the defunct company: lab equipment, computer programs, and most importantly, six patents. Office furniture and the like would go on the auction block. Both Fischer and Fletcher Cuttbate’s equity in RodCone Labs would be wiped out, not that there was much left in the end anyway. Zwiebel noted that because the molecular models and mathematical formulations for the RP cure belonged solely to Fletcher Cuttbate and had nothing to do with RodCone Labs, no legal or financial claims could be attached to the intellectual property of the new corporation by aggrieved creditors of the soon-to-

be defunct company. In short, Cuttbate Associates would begin operations debt-free and in a viable state to press on toward development and manufacturing of the RP cure.

Tracy nodded rhythmically to acknowledge each point. As the men spoke, Hannah perused the business entity database of the New York State Division of Corporation, and sure enough it verified that RodCone Labs had filed for Chapter 7 liquidation. Andrews continued, “The incorporation bylaws state that Cuttbate Labs will have three board seats. Right now, Fletch is the Chairman and Zwiebel here is holding a seat temporarily, leaving one seat open. The company has issued a million shares to Fletch with a par value of \$1, and is authorized to issue up to another ten million shares.”

Fletch started to address Tracy and her lawyer, “About that open board seat ...”

Andrews cut him off. Tracy perceived the interruption as a sign that the lawyer surmised his client might have become infatuated with her, and was about to offer her the position without consulting advisors. “Ms. Shepard, I understand you’ve expressed an interest in making a substantial investment in Cuttbate Associates. I’ve recommended to Mr. Cuttbate that the company issue \$1 million in 20-year Class A debt paying 3.875 percent over Treasuries.”

“I didn’t come here to loan money, Mr. Andrews. I came to take an equity stake. Make an investment. Mr. Cuttbate already knows that’s my position, and so do you, so let’s just cut the crap.” Tracy assumed a hardnosed stance, expecting Fletch to understand that it was in their mutual interest to dispense with non-starter proposals. Fletch obliged. “That’s right, Art. I already told you that.”

“I’m merely stating what I recommended to you, Mr. Cuttbate.”

Zwiebel intervened, “Ms. Shepard, Cuttbate Associates is prepared to issue a second lot of 999,999 shares – one share less than a million – to you in exchange for your \$1 million investment. Under no circumstances will Mr. Cuttbate relinquish majority ownership of the company.”

“I understand and I appreciate your position, Mr. Zwiebel, as Fletch’s legal advisor. But I have an alternative proposition to make. Grant me ten million options at ten cents exercisable upon IPO ...”

Caught off-guard, Zwiebel stammered, “Well, I ... uh, um ...” He looked toward Andrews, appealing for some modicum of guidance and moral support. Hannah Goldman peered up from her laptop at the floundering lawyer with amusement and contempt, for he fit the stereotype that she had come to formulate while being in the service of Tracy Shepard: the arrogant tough-guy who immediately folds like a card table when confronted unexpectedly, caught flat-footed and unprepared for even the most predictable of counter-proposals.

“... and appoint me to the third seat on the board. Cuttbate Labs needs someone like me on the executive team.”

Zwiebel cocked his head to one side, suggesting such terms were unreasonable, if not patently absurd, “Now, Mrs. Shepard ...”

“Ms. Shepard,” interrupted Tracy.

“I’m sorry. Ms. Shepard. Now, Ms. Shepard ...”

“Mr. Cuttbate,” interrupted Tracy, “what do you think?”

Fletch looked at his two advisors who simply glared back at him – they seemed to be insinuating “go for it big guy.”

“Well, Tracy ... uh, Ms. Shepard, there’s no major difference – at least to me, anyway – whether you own a million shares or options for ten million. Either way the RP drug can go to clinical trial. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Andrews said, “You know, Mr. Cuttbate, if your company goes public, Ms. Shepard here stands to become the majority shareholder.”

“Yeah, I know Art. If – a big ‘if’ – we go public. In the meantime, Tracy here is sticking her neck out a long way. It seems reasonable that she should be rewarded if it pays off.”

Silence in the room for several seconds. Tracy nodded to Hannah who then announced, “If you are amenable to Ms. Shepard’s offer, I will supply the detailed term sheet. Do you have a printer here somewhere, or did you lose it in the fire sale?”

Both Andrews and Zwiebel looked down and shook their heads at Hannah’s impudent remark. Tracy wasn’t too happy about it either – an uncalled-for cheap shot. “Just email them a copy, Hannah.”

As he had observed Tracy do when she tired of the discussion, Fletch stood up to indicate the meeting was over. Later that evening Fletch and his advisors received the terms of Tracy’s proposal from Hannah, and within a week a wire transfer of \$1 million showed up in the bank account of Cuttbate Associates.

Tracy received a registered letter from Bernard Zwiebel detailing the bylaws of the corporation and an invitation to attend the first board meeting in one month’s time at the old RodCone offices. He apologized that for now Cuttbate Associates would continue to occupy the inferior space until the new company could secure better accommodations. Arthur Andrews sent

Tracy a detailed statement of her option holdings accompanied by the terms and conditions associated with exercising them.

Tracy reclined in her bathtub, satisfied that she had protected Fletch from the vulture capitalists and in doing so had taken an active role in financing the continuing operations of the laboratory that would soon commence clinical trials on the promising cure for retinitis pigmentosa – a disease that her own ophthalmologist suspected she might be in the early stages of. As she soaked in the balmy water, contentedly drinking an iced Cointreau and admiring her just-done pedicure, Tracy recalled with a sly grin the look of astonishment on Fletcher Cuttbate's face that moment she grabbed his cock with her supple feet. She couldn't wait to do it again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hannah Goldman and her boyfriend Ben sat together in the dark on the sofa in Ben's apartment and watched *The Devil Wears Prada*. Ben, the son and grandson of tailors, and a vice-president with Liz Claiborne was a passionate follower of haut couture, and like Hannah, a fan of Meryl Streep. Having once met Anna Wintour, the fiery editor of *Vogue*, Ben remarked that Streep's portrayal of Amanda Priestly, a nasty control-freak – a role supposedly based on Wintour – seemed off the mark. With his arm draped around Hannah's shoulder, Ben said, "I've heard that Anna can be a difficult manager, but the time I chatted with her at that Metropolitan Art Museum fund-raiser, she was really charming. Nothing like this Meryl Streep portrayal."

"Maybe Meryl's not playing Anna Wintour. Maybe it's Tracy

Shepard – the Medea of Mediation,” giggled Hannah. Ben reluctantly smiled like he was in on the joke, but whatever he knew of Hannah’s premier client he had gotten directly from Hannah herself. And he had gotten plenty. Hannah reported regularly that Tracy was a bitchy, frustrated middle-aged career woman, a compulsive workaholic, a vain snob who strutted around in expensive, showy shoes. The derision could become especially caustic if Hannah had worked a long day taking orders and suffering opprobrium from Tracy.

Many times during her short relationship with Ben, Hannah told the 30 year-old story of how Tracy fecklessly hijacked both the yearbook and *The Merchant of Venice* when she and Tracy were classmates at Dalton. Lately, whenever Hannah bent the conversation to the topic of Tracy Shepard, Ben winced.

“Um, Hannah, can we not ...”

“I’m telling you, Ben dear. She’s still a real C. Just like when she stole the play from me. But I have a feeling she’s gonna get her comeuppance soon. She just invested a \$1 million in a tiny pharmaceutical company, but the whole thing smells fishy to me. For one thing, there seems to be a gap in the incorporation timeline – nothing outrageous, but if it were my million, I’d hold off until I got a solid explanation.”

Normally, Ben would be irritated by the imposition of conversation in the midst of watching a movie, but as he had already seen *The Devil Wears Prada* and read the roman à clef on which it was based, he gave his attention to Hannah. Besides, he had become intrigued when she mentioned fishy smells.

“You mean she went ahead with a \$1 million investment even after you pointed out the problems? She must really like the company.”

“I didn’t tell her about it. Screw her. She’s so smart – let her figure it out for herself.” Hannah placed a few popped kernels of corn in her mouth and chewed with evident satisfaction.

Ben undraped his arm from Hannah’s shoulder and said incredulously, “Hannah, you’re a lawyer. Isn’t it unethical to hold back information from your client? Can’t you get into trouble for that?”

In the background on the TV, the Andy character, Amanda Priestly’s assistant clucked, “She could be the most horrible person I’ve ever met, seen or heard about. She’s not happy unless everyone around her is panicked, nauseous or suicidal. And they all act like they’re curing cancer or something.”

Hannah looked at Ben quizzically. “Don’t be so naïve, Ben. Tracy knows what I tell her and she doesn’t know what I don’t tell her. Don’t look at me like that. Tracy the C doesn’t pay me enough to hold her hand 24 hours a day. Besides, it’d do her good to get knocked down a peg.”

Ben replied, “A million bucks? That’s a hell of a peg.” He tried to dampen the degree to which Hannah’s attitude rankled him.

“Don’t worry about Tracy. She can take of herself. She always has.” Hannah threw a few more kernels into her mouth and turned back toward the TV just as Amanda Priestly demanded of one of her quavering assistants, “... and tell him it’s too saturated with yellow, we need to bring up the pinks ...”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Right after becoming a major investor in Cuttbate Associates, Tracy hit the road for her next mediation gig. The exhausting experience consumed 30 hellish days, but the payoff was superb. She had logged 400 hours and 14,000 miles pursuing a settlement acceptable to the New York Jets' front office, the star college football player from Dayton and the aggrieved sports agent. Right from the start, none of the principals involved in the dispute would agree to meet in person with the others, requiring Tracy to travel almost daily from her home base in Manhattan to New Jersey, Baltimore and Ohio. A typical day might start with a 6 a.m. breakfast meeting in Florham Park followed by a flight from Newark to Baltimore in time to meet with Milton at 10 o'clock in the BWI Hilton. From there, Tracy might board a 12:50 flight to

Dayton for a late afternoon session over beers and nachos with Bradley, the thick-necked fullback, and his overly-protective father. If all went according to plan, it would be wheels up at 7 p.m. for the flight back from Dayton to New York via Atlanta, arriving at dingy and depressing LaGuardia Airport two minutes shy of midnight. Tracy came to appreciate the suffering that Middle-East peace negotiators – a post she aspired to fill someday – endured in the exercise of shuttle diplomacy, vainly pursuing some hopeful arrangement amenable to the Arabs and the Israelis. During this relentless routine, Tracy was able to call Fletcher only a few times from the road. Although he suggested it on each call, she couldn't even squeeze in one quick meal with him.

After nearly four weeks of making the grueling loop, softening up the parties, cajoling everyone along the way to be flexible and fiscally sane, Tracy finally secured commitments from all sides to attend a joint meeting on neutral territory – her spacious home in Sutton Place.

Tracy worked her magic, slowly and methodically inching the obstinate sides closer to capitulation and agreement. She exercised Jobian patience even when she was called upon to repeat terms and reiterate ground rules. In her individual meetings with each participant over the previous weeks, Tracy convincingly raised the specter that each was vulnerable, facing an unsatisfactory result; now, in her apartment present together for the first time, the parties uniformly felt less confident in their positions than they had a month earlier. Each harbored an uncomfortable level of concern that they might get the shit-end of the stick – exactly the mindset Tracy had labored so valiantly to instill. Consequently, the men mostly behaved themselves,

deferring to Tracy to lead the mediation. After a month of haggling, and with the Jets' summer training camp starting shortly, the will to drag out negotiations wilted considerably.

To foster progress, Tracy increased the level of discomfort for her guests by craftily programming the thermostat to increase the temperature in her apartment by one degree per hour. Approaching dinnertime, it was an unpleasant 81 degrees in the living room. By then each man had shed his suit jacket except Bradley and his father who provocatively wore Polo shirts bearing the logo of a sports agency in competition with Milton. They did so to comply with a request by Tracy – it was a not-so-subtle gesture to signal that Milton's days were numbered.

Tracy ordered a luscious spread of tempting meals from the nearby David Burke Townhouse restaurant and instructed the caterers to park it all just outside her door at 8 p.m. where the succulent aroma of the withheld food could waft in, torturing her famished guests. At the first whiff of food, Bradley's father excused himself and quietly slipped into the kitchen to filch a snack, only to be rudely met by a sparsely stocked refrigerator containing nothing more than a half-empty container of soy milk and a few potatoes spouting shoots. The previous day Tracy had moved the rest of the contents across the hall to her neighbor's refrigerator.

In the end, Milton did as Tracy had suggested on the day of their first meeting: he accepted a monetary settlement from the Jets to walk away from the star player, give up his claims and drop his lawsuit. She had counseled him that the Jets and their star recruit would inevitably gang up on him, and if he pressed too hard and too long, and interfered with their marriage plans, they would make it their mission to blackball him from the industry and beat him into penury. Again, Tracy marveled at how grown men could

stretch into weeks a task that, if entered into without a round-the-world trip's worth of emotional luggage, could be resolved in 45 minutes – and without necessitating payment of a hefty mediation fee. Did these men not know of the prisoner's dilemma; had they never read about game theory?

Once Milton folded, Bradley, with the approval of his father, finally endorsed the contract with the Jets and joined the roster in time to attend training camp. Tracy popped the corks on several bottles of mid-1980s Louis Roederer Cristal and proposed a toast to the end of acrimony and the beginning of another 1969 for the Jets. After the guests finished chowing down on pretzel crusted crabcake, chilled oysters, truffles and pineapple mignonette, Bronx-style filet mignon of veal & veal cheek with sunchoke purée and fig ravioli, and butterscotch panna cotta, the newest New York Jet invited the other men to accompany him to Flashdancers, an upscale strip club near the Ed Sullivan Theater. Bradley hoped a trip to a topless bar might establish his credentials as a worthy legacy to Broadway Joe Namath. Perturbed, Tracy announced, "What about me?"

Milton – not completely happy with the mediated settlement, but "satisfied" in the parlance of alternative dispute resolution – asked with a hint of contemptuousness as he unscrewed a bottle of Ketel One he pilfered from Tracy's freezer, "You a fan of tits and ass, Ms. Shepard?"

Tracy was wearing a Narcisco Rodriguez darted bodice dress and sheer silk stockings with a black seam up the back like those worn in the 1940s. She laughed and casually dropped into a deep leather club chair and crossed her legs, forcing the hem well above her knees. "A fan, Milton? No, I'm more of a scout – always looking to discover new techniques in the field of eroticism." The sports agent leered at Tracy's well-defined calves as he took a long

draw of ice-cold vodka from his glass; he couldn't take his eyes off her right foot, tanned and fit, a pump dangling seductively from her toes.

Tracy summoned her limo driver and he transported the principal players in the mediation marathon across town to Flashdancers. The secondary participants were reduced to riding to the club in a taxicab. Accompanied by a woman, even one in her forties, the men had no problem gaining entry to the strip club, and once the beefy bouncer realized he was standing in the presence of New York Jets management and their newest star player, he escorted the party to a special VIP room overlooking the action on the dance floor. Bradley ordered a few bottles of premium liquor, each fetching a price of several hundred dollars. The manager of Flashdancers comped the group a hefty spread of hors d'oeuvres. A sexy blonde with impossibly-perfect tits invited Bradley to a private room in the back where she presumably engaged him in scintillating conversation about growing up in Dayton, Ohio. Tracy guessed it was the first time the young football player had ever left the protective dome constructed around him by his conservative father.

The music pulsed. The booze flowed. Topless waitresses brought plates of sushi and left with sizable tips worked under the elastic of their snappy G-strings. Milton ran out of money and left the party to throw up in the men's room. An acrobatic girl hoisted herself upon the stripper pole on the dance floor and placed a leg-lock around the neck of a particularly drunken bachelor, forcing the man's face deep into the declivity of her delicacies. Tracy made a mental note to find a way to replicate the maneuver in her own bedroom.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After consuming a light Sunday breakfast by the window of her apartment overlooking the FDR Drive and the East River, Tracy reviewed her calendar for the upcoming week. Mixed in among several meetings and conference calls, appointments with new clients, and a keynote speech she had been invited to deliver to grad students at the Wharton School of Business, was the first board meeting for Cuttbate Associates. It was an inauspicious hour of time posted on the upcoming Wednesday, but she had blocked off the entire afternoon, anticipating a romantic celebration of the inauguration of the new business. She looked forward to nurturing her nascent relationship with Fletch.

The moment Tracy spotted the blocked-off afternoon on her calendar she experienced a clutch of sexual desire, and soon

she began rummaging around in her closet for Woody Johnson – the long-dormant dildo from her college days. Restored with a fresh set of batteries, the dildo performed admirably, bringing Tracy to two solid orgasms. She shivered in ecstasy as she recalled Fletch’s tattooed scrotum and his voluminous ejaculation onto her feet. It was a great way to start the day.

At 5:30 on Wednesday morning, the alarm clock-radio blasted the relentless beat of some soulless electronic club music, but Tracy had already been up and about for 45 minutes. She rose early this morning to complete a number of tasks before the Cuttbate Associates board meeting: pick up the new Michael Kors bubble dress from the tailor; see her doctor for Botox injections, visit the spa for a Bikini wax, eyebrow shaping and a pedicure; and if time permitted, skim once more through the corporation by-laws that Fletch’s lawyer sent a month earlier.

The morning’s chores consumed more time than Tracy allotted; only because her limo driver ran two red lights and made an illegal right turn did Tracy arrive on time to the offices of the now-defunct RodCone Laboratories. She dismissed her driver and walked into the cramped, unattended lobby of the old office building. The directory still listed RodCone Labs on the second floor; the plastic letters spelled out “RodC ne L bs,” the missing “o” and “a” intermixed with other fallen letters and numbers at the bottom of the enclosed glass case. Tracy ascended the stairs rather than risk getting stuck in the elevator – not so remote a possibility given the overall poor condition of the ill-maintained building. She made a mental note to ask Bernard Zwiebel about the plans to rent new office space.

When she arrived at RodCone’s office at the end of the hall

Tracy was baffled to find that the door had been removed from its hinges, affording unfettered access to any wandering intruder. Tracy walked slowly into the office. “Is anyone here?” she asked aloud. She heard something that sounded like scratching coming from the rear, and backed up cautiously toward the entrance. An older woman in a soiled uniform waddled out of the restroom holding what looked like a windshield ice-scraper. The name of her employer, Knickerbocker Kleaning Kompany, was stitched onto her shirt.

“¿Porqué está aqui?” croaked the old Mexican woman.

“I don’t understand. Where is everybody? Isn’t this Cuttbate Associates?” Tracy noted with concern the large red letters on the woman’s breast pocket: KKK.

“Dejaron. Estoy raspando mierda de la planta. ¿Te gustaría ayudarme?”

“Do you speak English?”

“Si.”

“Where is everybody?”

“They leave. One months ago.”

“Who are you?”

“Off the floor I clean the shit from. Painful to my back. Muy difícil to scrape dried shit.” The woman flashed Tracy a creepy smile. The old lady was missing both incisors and all her molars.

Frightened and confused, Tracy bolted for the door and ran down the stairs, nearly tripping when her heel caught a loose tread. She expected to find the limo parked by the curb. It wasn’t. *Where the hell did he go?* Not wishing to hang around outside what looked to be a crime scene, Tracy rushed to mix into a crowd to take a moment to regroup. *Gotta think this out!* Tracy walked briskly to Seventh Avenue and sat at a table outside a tiny bistro.

As she fumbled with her cell phone a waitress arrived. Before the girl came to a complete stop Tracy commanded brusquely, “Bring me a Ketel One on the rocks and throw in a couple of lemon slices.” The waitress pirouetted like a dancer and headed back toward the bar. Out of earshot she muttered to a fellow waiter, “frickin’ bitch.”

Tracy called Fletch only to receive a recording that his line was no longer in service. *Shit, it was working the other day.* She tried again. On the third attempt, when she heard the same robotic beep preceding the irritating message, she slammed her palm angrily on the tabletop. *Where the hell is he?* Tracy suddenly felt faint. Blood rushed from her face. She dipped a napkin into a flower vase on the two-top and wiped her forehead. The waitress arrived with the glass of vodka and Tracy took a long pull. *Calm down, Trace – take it easy.*

After a couple of minutes, Tracy called her lawyer Hannah, and instructed her to begin an in-depth investigation into the current status of Cuttbate Associates, and to initiate an internet search of Fischer and Fletcher Cuttbate. “Find out what the fuck is going on,” commanded Tracy loudly, attracting the shushing scowls of a young couple sitting nearby with their two pre-schoolers.

Although to Tracy it seemed much longer, Hannah called back within five minutes to report that the Cuttbate website was down and that a database search revealed that the incorporation filing for Cuttbate Associates had been rejected earlier in the week. Tracy barked some more orders to Hannah, and within the hour received more bad news: the phone numbers of Bernard Zwiebel and Arthur Andrews, Fletch’s lawyer and accountant, were inoperative, the lease on the office space on 17th had

expired seven months ago and the rent was paid in cash on a month-by-month basis, and Fletch's bungalow in Hamilton Square was currently available for rent. "Two-thousand a month, fully furnished, authentic 1950s kitchen, utilities extra, according to the landlord," reported Hannah, as if Tracy needed to know such details. Sensing Hannah might be enjoying a frisson of schadenfreude, Tracy replied curtly, "Watch it honey, or you can start pounding the pavement for a new client." Indeed, between her investigative calls and web searches, catty Hannah dialed up her boyfriend Ben to tell him the juicy news that Tracy was losing it. Ben said nothing. He just shook his head in sadness that the unraveling of Hannah's high-school nemesis could give his girlfriend such a queer sense of satisfaction. Concluding that Hannah suffered a latent pathology over her rivalry with Tracy Shepard, Ben resolved to break up in the very near future.

Tracy pressed on, "Check through all the records of the people I met with regarding RodCone and Cuttbate Associates. Try to find someone who can shed some light on this fuh ... uh, ugly mess." She rubbed her eyes, shook her head and sipped the dregs of her third vodka, and then Tracy summoned her limo driver and slumped in the back seat for the long, painful ride back home. She could not yet bring herself to acknowledge what she understood viscerally – that Fletcher Fucking Cuttbate had conned her out of a million bucks.

Bright and early the next morning after a fitful night spent staring at the ceiling when she wasn't tormented by apocalyptic nightmares, Tracy made arrangements to meet with the FBI at 26 Federal Plaza as soon as the offices opened. With 18 hours to contemplate the worst – that the Cuttbate brothers had led her

on and made her believe they had a cure for her father's malady; that they stole \$1 million; that Fletcher had taken her under false pretenses – Tracy looked tired and haggard, even after the injections of Botox the previous day. She tortured herself with questions. *How could the vaunted “Medea of Mediation” have allowed herself to fall for a confidence scheme? How in good conscience can I face the students at the Wharton School when I am clearly unqualified to lecture on being a savvy negotiator? Why did I have sex with that dumpy bastard?*

Tracy wasn't ready to break down and cry just yet; there was too much work to be done to apprehend the criminals and reverse the damage. Sullen and pessimistic, she made the trip downtown to Federal Plaza. Special Agent Gary Taft in the bureau's fraud division greeted her. Tracy recalled the tale for Taft, starting with the flight out of JFK airport where she encountered Fischer Cuttbate. She described the meetings at RodCone Labs, of visiting Fletcher Cuttbate at the request of his identical twin brother, the disappearance of Fischer and some of his employees following the FBI raid, and of being pulled into a scam to invest in the newly reconstituted Cuttbate Associates.

“Let's go back to the part about the FBI raid on, uh,” Taft glanced at his notes, “RodCone Laboratories. The place on 17th Street. Tell me more about that.”

Tracy recalled her conversation with the company's receptionist the day she called the lab from Midland, Texas – that the FBI had frozen the lab's assets and put out warrants for Fischer and his business development director, Chad Knecht. As Tracy spoke, Taft clicked around on his computer and by the time she finished retelling the details, he replied, “There's nothing in our files about any raid on RodCone Labs, or any

warrants on Cuttbate or Knecht. Nothing. I'm sorry."

Tracy just stared slackjawed like a little girl hearing for the first time that not only is Santa Claus a myth, but that the Easter Bunny murdered the Tooth Fairy. "N-nothing?" is all she could muster.

"It appears that not only was RodCone Labs a front, but that the raid was fabricated as part of the scheme to get you to ally yourself with the brother. I'm so sorry, Mrs. Shepard. We'll initiate an investigation. I must tell you though that a scheme involving so many people in so many places over such a long period of time would have to've been perpetrated by a clever cast of characters."

All Tracy could say was, "I understand, Agent Taft."

Because Tracy possessed no photographs of any of the comen, Taft escorted her to the office of a forensic artist to develop some composite sketches. The artist interviewed Tracy for basic details and displayed images from a massive database of eyes, noses, chins, ears, and eyebrows. The sheer quantity and variety of the facial components hurt her head. When Tracy was finally satisfied the artist had adequately captured the faces of Fletcher and Fischer, the artist commented, "Do you think it's possible these twin brothers were actually one man?"

"Huh?"

"Did you ever see them together?"

Tracy ransacked her memory. *Goddamn!* "No, I never did actually, y'know, see the two of them together. They didn't get along."

"I see. One more thing Ms. Shepard. Did either one of these men have any distinguishing physical characteristics that might help identify them? A scar, maybe, or a tattoo? Anything like

that?” The artist placed the eraser end of the pencil in her mouth as she waited for a response.

Tracy’s mind ran a hundred miles an hour. *Tattoo? Like the dice on the bastard’s wrinkly balls? The two that added to lucky fucking seven?* “No. No tattoos ... or anything else, either.” Tracy had already suffered enough pain and embarrassment since walking into the barren offices of the phony Cuttbate Associates and learning that everything she had believed for the previous few months was an evil mirage. She certainly wasn’t going to confide in a sketch artist, a complete stranger, that she had once maneuvered herself into a position that afforded her an unimpeded view of the criminal’s balls.

Tracy received an update a week later from Special Agent Taft that his team had so far uncovered no solid leads. The team of conmen had apparently established their fronts using cash, disposable cell phones, and an offshore internet service provider somewhere in Southeast Asia. Like many Americans, they had filled out simple online forms to set up legitimate corporations. Taft explained that with today’s technology it was fairly easy to mock up stock certificates, bank statements, titles, identification cards and the like. He urged her to be patient and not to berate herself for falling for the scam, given the elaborate nature of it. “Believe me, Mrs. Shepard, our office is overwhelmed with cases such as yours. Very smart people become victims every day. Just look at the Madoff scandal – that went on for years and ensnared hundreds of wealthy, sophisticated investors.” Tracy understood Taft’s intentions, but she silently disagreed – the people who got taken by Bernie Madoff weren’t smart or sophisticated. They were merely greedy chumps – just like her. But while their

greed was purely for wealth and status, her fallibility was the vain wish to be the hero who rescued a promising drug, and in the process cured her father and collected a lover. Tracy was forced to conclude that she had been a chump from the start, and especially upsetting, that White Knights truly no longer existed.

In a strange way, it was liberating to admit she had been a fool who bore the majority of the blame for her predicament. With time, Tracy ceased pitying herself and decided to devote her energies to a new project. She put aside new mediation engagements and canceled out of the speeches she had agreed to deliver; the address to the MBA students at Wharton had been emotionally difficult. She fired Hannah Goldman for gross incompetence, and sent a letter of complaint to the New York Bar Association. Tracy placed everything on hold so she could take on a new project: locating Fletcher Cuttbate and making him pay. Perhaps not with the \$1 million he stole – it had surely been divided among the co-conspirators, and Fletcher had probably blown his share of the loot – but with a different currency, one more painful with which to part. Tracy interviewed several private investigators, negotiating terms along the way, and winnowed the list down to two highly-qualified contenders. Before she decided on which to hire, Tracy drove out to Inwood to apprise her father of the situation. She owed him an explanation after stringing him along on the promise of a cure for his – and now her – retinitis pigmentosa. As if being scammed for a \$1 million wasn't bad enough, Tracy recently learned from her ophthalmologist that the tests were conclusive: she was one of the rare females who had it, and it would slowly get worse.

Charles Shepard sat next to his daughter on the old sofa, the

same one Tracy used to dance upon to the music of David Bowie and Todd Rundgren when her parents were out of the house. The springs had lost much of their bounce – their potential energy – over the decades. Tracy joyfully recalled her father’s simple, clear, engaging explanations of the physics of springs, and that when compressed they become storehouses of potential energy waiting to be released as kinetic energy. No wonder he had been so loved by his students at Columbia – he had a natural ability to make complex concepts easy to understand. Now, he just sat muted, sunken in the sofa, a miniature version of an old man reduced by the enormity of the furniture around him.

Tracy chickened out. She delivered what she believed was a less-painful story for both of them: that the RP cure failed in the clinical trials, and that the upstart company, lacking another strategy, fell asunder into bankruptcy. Such was the way of bleeding-edge pharmaceutical research. After all, she had consistently portrayed the cure to her father as a risky, speculative proposition. Or had she? Thinking back, she was quite the cheerleader for Fletcher Cuttbate’s miracle cure, believing his cockamamie equations, falling all over herself to become his companion. *Fuck it.* No way could she bring herself to tell her father how his well-educated savvy daughter had been fooled – and in the process lost \$1 million. A million dollars – the sum would certainly shock her father into cardiac arrhythmia. It probably exceeded all the money the man had earned in his entire academic career.

“I’m sorry, Dad.”

“Don’t be sorry, Tracy Rae. It’s not like it’s your fault. I should never have gotten my hopes up so high, I guess.” He chuckled, “I was stupid. I can’t imagine anyone being so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid, Dad. Don’t say that. Don’t ever think that. I’m the stupid one.” Tracy grabbed his hand and kissed his palm. It smelled sweetly of the designer soap she bought him to replace the cheap generic brand he kept dropping on the bathroom floor. Unable to see whatever dirt and grime might have come to soil his hands, Charles Shepard washed them thoroughly and often.

“I love you, Tracy Rae. Please come by and visit me more often – if you have time, of course. I know you’re busy. How’s work going, by the way? Any big clients?”

“Well, I’ve got a really big project getting started. It’s going to consume a lot of my time, but when I’m done it will deliver a nice payoff. Really sweet.” Tracy clenched her teeth at the thought of Fletcher Cuttbate – it was a gesture of anger and hopefulness.

“Ah, that’s nice, dear. Now, don’t be a stranger.”

“I won’t Dad. Hey, how about we go to dinner sometime this week?”

“Love to. Anytime, sweetheart.”

Tracy smiled. It was the first time in a long time she enjoyed a happy notion. On her way back home she called Grayson Richards, one of the two remaining finalists in her search for a private investigator, and notified him that she had chosen to retain his firm’s services. To ensure his undivided attention on smoking out Cuttbate, Tracy negotiated a contract which paid Richards, on top of his regular fees, half of whatever he recovered from the conman. Richards thanked Tracy for her prudent selection, but before he could continue with the ass-kissing, she interrupted, declaring, “I expect results, Mr. Richards. You will work on my problem until you solve it or you die, whichever comes first.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Grayson Richards specialized in cases of fraud and extortion. He was a former agent in the US Customs Intelligence Bureau who had worked undercover overseas investigating elaborate schemes to import black-market automobiles, heavy equipment and durable goods. As a younger man, he was an MP in the Marines. Richards's fees were far higher than the industry average, but seemed justified by his track record. He contracted solely with wealthy, powerful clients – the types who were most often the targets of complex scams and confidence games running into the hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars. Richards claimed the established law enforcement community was ill-suited for his kind of work – too many restrictions, not enough imagination.

Tracy met with Richards in her home where he conducted a

comprehensive interview, reviewed the documents she received from Cuttbate's entourage, studied the composite drawing. Like the FBI sketch artist, Richards theorized that Fischer and Fletcher Cuttbate – no doubt aliases – might be one and the same person. Tracy still found that concept difficult to accept.

“Have you ever seen *Vertigo*, Ms. Shepard? Great movie – Jimmy Stewart, Kim Novak, San Francisco?”

“Not in a long time. Isn't that the one where a photographer is laid up in his apartment and spies on his neighbors?”

“No, that's *Rear Window*. *Vertigo* is about a man who murders his wife with the cooperation of a woman who poses as her double. You should check it out sometime.”

“What else can you tell me?” replied Tracy, looking to shelve the Hitchcockian hagiography and return the discussion back to her problems.

To this point in the conversation, all Grayson Richards's questions were of a factual nature. Now, he asked Tracy for her own analysis, opinions and theories.

“How do you think this Cuttbate fellow knew to meet you at JFK airport and to be ready to forfeit his seat for you? That couldn't have been a coincidence, don't you agree?”

Tracy pushed out her lower lip and furrowed her brow like a spelling bee contestant preparing to nail the “big word” – *apotemnophilia*, perhaps. In fact she was annoyed that the question had never occurred to her. She still believed that Fischer Cuttbate had been a charming gentleman that day. “I don't have any idea.”

“Well, I do. You said you were flying that day to meet with some clients in LA.” Richards looked down at his notes. “NanoNano and PicoTech, correct?”

Tracy nodded her head. She could tell where the PI was going.

“My guess, Ms. Shepard, is that Cuttbate had a co-conspirator inside one or both of these companies. Someone who knew you were planning to fly that day at that exact time – finding out what carrier you would take. You said you met Cuttbate again on the return flight. Coincidence? Not in my business, I’ll tell you. Nothing is a coincidence – everything is planned.”

Tracy continued to nod. She was impressed with Richard’s apparent aptitude to contemplate the devious, and angered at the extent to which one person would go to devastate another.

Richard’s continued, “I’d even go so far as to postulate that members of Cuttbate’s gang were sitting on that plane to ensure first class was overbooked by the time you showed up at the airport. You told me your limo driver was late picking you up that morning – do you trust him?”

Tracy grew wide-eyed. Grayson Richard’s conspiracy theory was taking on gargantuan proportions, and yet the fact that she couldn’t readily dismiss it as outlandish paranoia was unsettling. *My limo driver? In on the scam? I can’t believe it. But still ...*

“I’ll need a list of everyone in the meeting you had with these two companies. That’s where I’ll start. Of course, I plan to assign some basic blocking and tackling to my associates – you know, database searches, interviews with landlords, stuff like that. OK?”

Tracy shrugged her shoulders. “Whatever you say, Mr. Richards. You’re the expert.”

“Call me Gray.”

“No thank you, Mr. Richards. I prefer to keep this very professional.”

Richards stood up, expressing no indication that Tracy’s rejection insulted him. “I understand. Thank you for your time

today, Ms. Shepard. I'll keep you up to speed." Tracy escorted him to the door and shook his hand. Then as he stepped out, she spoke up, "One more thing I forgot to mention. Fletcher Cuttbate has a pair of dice tattooed on his scrotum. A three and a four. One on each, uh, ball."

Richards raised a single eyebrow, but other than that showed no sign of surprise, shock or lewd curiosity. He grinned imperceptibly as he wrote a note in his book. "I'll check with some of the tattoo parlors and see if I come up with anything. Thanks again."

Tracy closed the door, cradled her head in her hands and burst into tears.

Weeks went by without any hopeful news from private investigator Grayson Richards. As promised, he provided regular status updates that seemed to illustrate his dedication and industry. He obviously was expending a great deal of effort and billable hours on the investigation as evidenced by the reams of material he produced from his interviews and the database searches compiled by his underlings. Richards noted that a few tattoo parlors in the New York region had inked scrota, but none with dice. He assured Tracy that he had prodded the parlors into asking around the tat community about the pair of dice. Tracy thanked Richards, but she was beginning to feel as though the PI had become bogged down in minutia.

"What did you find out about the people at NanoNano and PicoTech? Any leads there?" asked Tracy desperately.

"Yeah, I'm working on it. Ran some searches on the list of names you gave me. No one turned up in any criminal databases. As you know, both companies are pretty new, so no one there has

a long history of employment with them. Hard to tell who might be a bad actor.” Sensing frustration, and possibly some buyer’s remorse from his wealthy client, Richards added, “Don’t worry, Ms. Shepard. Cases like yours are like a game of Sudoku – you struggle to get a few numbers in place, it may take a long time, but as more spaces get filled the game speeds up and before you know it, you’ve solved it.”

“I see. Sudoku. OK.” Tracy hung up the phone with a sigh. She went back to her laptop and visited the website of NanoNano where she read that the company had just successfully completed its long-planned IPO. “Very interesting,” she thought to herself. Awarded a few thousand round-one shares of NanoNano stock as part of her mediation compensation, an allotment now worth about 50 grand, Tracy was certain she could get an audience with the company’s management. And that’s precisely what she proceeded to work on.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Matt's secretary called in from the anteroom, "Mr. Blankenschein, Tracy Shepard is on line two."

Matt put his father on hold and took Tracy's call. "Tracy Shepard. How nice to hear from you. I hope you're pleased with our IPO."

"Congratulations, Matt. Well done."

"Let me thank you again for all your hard work last year. Without you we'd probably still be battling those cocksuckers at PicoTech." Matt Blankenschein, the 27 year-old CEO of NanoNano laughed heartily and with the ease of a man whose future is bright. "What can I do for you, Tracy?"

Tracy explained that in the past year she had become intrigued by the promising applications of nanotechnology, and was now considering acquiring a larger stake in NanoNano.

The articles she read in *Fortune* and *Scientific American*, and professors she spoke with at Columbia had convinced her that nanotechnology could become an explosive growth opportunity. She spoke intelligently about carbon nanotubes and fullerenes, and referred in some detail to one of NanoNano's key patent filings. Matt listened intently, curious about Tracy's purpose in calling. He knew Tracy was a minor shareholder at the moment, but from her spirited recounting of the market dynamics he surmised she was positioning herself to stake a major position. When she mentioned discussions that were already underway with fellow investors about formulating a coalition to acquire more than 25 percent of the company, Matt's ears pricked up with alarm. *A 13D filing? Jesus Christ!* Such a sizable investment would make Tracy's coalition the third largest shareholder behind Matt himself and the venture capital firm that funded the launch of the company.

Tracy slung all this shit on NanoNano's CEO not because she had the slightest interest in carbon nanotubes and fullerenes, but because she wanted to secure some quality face time with the firm's important employees – the ones who could have known the details of her mediation sessions between NanoNano and PicoTech.

"I'm honored that you think NanoNano is such a compelling investment, Tracy. You know, a 25 percent stake is pretty big. If you're that serious, you must come out here and meet with the board and top management."

Extremely satisfied at receiving the hoped-for invitation, Tracy replied, "Love to, Matt."

"We're having a lavish dinner party next week – don't tell the VCs, heh, heh, I said 'lavish' – to celebrate the IPO. Why don't

you come out here as my guest? It'll be fun and you can chat up the brass and brains – they're mutually exclusive, you know, heh heh." Tracy could not tell if Matt was sincere in his invitation or harbored a deep-seated fear of an unwanted intrusion by an outside entity, but either way she didn't care.

"That sounds perfect. Send me the details. Again – Mazel Tov, Matt. You should be proud." Tracy hung up and immediately began arranging the trip to the West Coast. Her first consideration: which pair of shoes to wear to the gala event?

Matt Blankenschein, an investor in upscale restaurants in addition to being a founder of start-up high-tech companies, used his considerable suck with the manager at Osteria Mozza in the tony Melrose District of Los Angeles to reserve the hard-to-get Primo Ministro Room for his company's private party. The place was always jam-packed with patrons, including semi-famous celebrities and their entourages. Founded by world-renowned chef Mario Batali, Osteria Mozza boasted an expansive mozzarella bar situated in the center of the action, offering such delicacies as burricotti with braised artichokes, pine nuts, currants and mint pesto, nodini with peperonata, olive taggiasche and oregano, and burrata with leeks vinaigrette and mustard breadcrumbs. Modeled after wine bars and cigar emporia, Mozza's mozzarella bar also offered a tasting flight for the less-experienced diners that included burrata from Puglia, fior di latte and bufala mozzarella.

Dressed in a colorful Missoni wrap dress and a stylish pair of Cesare Paciottis with chunky, bright yellow heels, Tracy sat on Matt Blankenschein's right at a large, round table accompanied by six other senior members of NanoNano and their wives

and girlfriends. She noted that only one woman – Marilyn Jenkins, the VP of Human Relations (once known quaintly as “Personnel”) – occupied a position of authority in NanoNano. Tracy concluded that NanoNano was run like a Stanford/CalTech frat-boy operation. Wearing a big-shouldered John Varvatos jacket and True Religion jeans, Matt reminded Tracy of the archetypal spoiled rich brat – his father had founded a company that was later acquired for big bucks by Intel in the mid 1980s just as the chip company was introducing its successful 80386 microprocessor – who stumbles blissfully through life protected by an armada of guardian angels. After the NanoNano IPO – on paper at least – Matt was worth \$125 million.

Marilyn Jenkins, who had come to the IPO party stag, sat directly across from Tracy. She was the second oldest woman at the table after Tracy, a bubbly, 40-year-old who might have been mistaken for someone ten years younger if she colored her salt-and-pepper hair. Tracy assumed the woman had had facial work done, as well as a boob job, but chose to retain her natural hair color in an attempt to convey maturity and garner a greater degree of respect. Marilyn had recently resigned a VP-level position at Oracle to join NanoNano. “My options were under water anyway,” she explained without a hint of disappointment or dejection in her voice. Ownership of worthless options had become commonplace in California’s technology incubators following the dotcom implosion and tepid economic recovery that followed.

Matt had instructed the restaurant to serve top shelf booze and to pour it liberally, so with the liquor flowing freely Marilyn Jenkins was fairly tipsy before the clock struck 8. She took another drink and continued with her story. “I hired into Oracle

as a mid-level exec in August 2000 and got a bunch of options at \$45. A pretty sizable lot. Unfortunately for me, the next time Oracle stock hit \$45 was never. It went straight down from there. The stock chart looked like a ski slope.”

Matt interjected, “Like the Piz Bernina when viewed from the west.” Like a snooty namedropper, he waited for the inevitable “what’s that?” and he quickly got it from his compliant date, Tajja.

“Piz Bernina? It’s the highest mountain in the eastern Alps,” he explained. “It’s near San Moritz but you can’t ski on it. The mountainside drops straight down like the profile of an ugly stock.” Before anyone could sidetrack the conversation to winter sports or a recent visit to Switzerland, Matt worked his way back to the original subject. “I remember when Oracle dipped below eight bucks. I was gonna short the pig, but my old man advised me to buy up a bunch of it instead. Hell, eight bucks? I picked up a large float, something just shy of a million shares. Dumped it two years later when it hit \$22.” Eliciting laughs all around the table, Matt told his rapt sycophantic underlings, “I bought the Astondoa with the proceeds. You should have seen the look on the dealer’s face when I told him I’d be paying cash for it.” Tracy rolled her eyes at the sheer pomposity of it all. With mock seriousness, to more hoots and howls, Matt added, “I threw my dad a C-note for his sage advice.”

Laughing along with the rest of the guests at the table but not particularly amused by the juxtaposition of Matt’s opportune stock purchase against her own financial misfortunes, Marilyn tacked in a new direction.

“I sure hope my financial luck will turn around. I’ve been talking to a guy who’s looking for an investor for his cure for

acromegaly. Ron Subytic introduced me to him.”

Matt turned to Tracy and explained, “Ron Subytic was one of our corporate strategists, but he left to join the enemy – PicoTech.” A couple people around the table booed and hissed at the mention of NanoNano’s chief competitor in the nanotech field. “He has acromegaly. His body never stopped growing. Huge hands, fingers like sausages. I think you may have met him in the mediation meetings last year – looks quite a lot like that huckster on TV, uh ... Tony Roma.”

“Robbins, you goof,” giggled the woman with the Farrah Fawcett hairdo seated to the left of Matt Blankenschein, a former soft-core porno star and Matt’s current girlfriend, Taija. “Tony Robbins.”

Matt took a sip of Champagne, then chortled, “Right. Tony Huckster-boy Robbins, Mr. Self-Help.”

“That’s true enough,” replied one of the VCs. “The money he makes off the rubes on those TV shows sure looks like ‘self help’ to me.” Taija cackled like a chicken.

During this annoying back-and-forth, Tracy dredged up the mental image of Ron Subytic from the brief time she encountered him in the meeting; the only person in the room taller than Tracy herself – somewhat handsome, somewhat creepy-looking, deep voice.

Marilyn slogged on. “Anyway, Ron introduced me to this guy who has a cure – almost – for acromegaly, but his twin brother won’t help him make progress on it. The brother’d rather develop a pill that patients have to take everyday. Apparently a daily therapy will generate more money for the company than a cure, I guess. Calvin – that’s the guy’s name. Calvin’s ready to go to clinical trial – do you know how expensive clinical trials are?”

– with his cure, but can't get the VCs to go along. He calls them 'vulture capitalists.'

One of NanoNano's VCs and a board member responded with mock umbrage, "I resemble that remark, Ms. Jenkins."

Tracy sat dumbstruck. She felt like Dustin Hoffman's character, Thomas Levy, in *Marathon Man* after he believes he's been rescued from the clutches of the tormenting Nazi dentist only to be driven back by his would-be rescuer to the scene of torture when he fails to answer the baffling question, "Is it safe?" Tracy was utterly shocked to hear a story so similar in its particulars to that of her own tale of deceit. A year had passed since the big con and Tracy believed she had essentially healed from the wounds inflicted upon her by Fletcher/Fischer Cuttbate. She thought she was cured until she heard Marilyn describe an encounter with a noble man dedicated to doing social good but is stymied by his avaricious twin brother. Right away, Tracy concluded that "Calvin," the champion for an acromegaly cure, was indeed Fletcher Cuttbate – a slick vampire preying on another professional woman with a soft spot for sufferers of rare, progressively debilitating diseases.

Always needing to control the conversation around him, Matt was about to reply to Marilyn's rhetorical question about the cost of clinical trials when Tracy blurted out, "Marilyn, did this guy – Calvin – did he have dice tattooed on his balls? A three and a four?" As soon as she uttered the question, Tracy regretted it. *What the hell did I just say?* She had a brief out-of-body experience whereby she stared dumbfounded at herself along with the other nonplussed guests.

Everyone at the table gazed in stunned, frozen silence at Tracy as though she had gone temporarily insane. Tracy froze

too – appalled that she could have injudiciously posited such a ridiculous, off-the-wall question. Because Tracy’s interjection was completely orthogonal to the conversation and patently inappropriate – and because Tracy had been introduced as a famous mediator and potential big investor, and not some wacky pal of Matt’s – no one at the table laughed, or even chuckled nervously. Tracy felt the intense searing of eyeballs upon her face. If she had had just a little more advanced notice of the Calvin story, she would have waited to confront Marilyn in private. Now, she would have to smile awkwardly while struggling to construct a plausible explanation for the bizarre outburst.

Marilyn stammered, “Ab ... absolutely, not!”

Tracy jumped in, “I meant his arms, his biceps. A three and a four on his biceps. I meant to say biceps, not ... a three on one bicep and a four on the other bicep. Did he, maybe, perhaps?” Tracy grinned toothily and looked around the table in a jerky, desperate attempt to elicit some sympathy for what she hoped would be interpreted as a simple gaffe – a Freudian slip. Marilyn shifted uncomfortably in her seat and glanced around the table to assess the reactions of the others.

After a moment, Matt spoke up. “Jesus, Tracy, you’ve got me a trifle worried. I hope the nominal third-largest shareholder of NanoNano can tell the difference between a man’s nuts and his guns.” With that pithy declaration the guests at the table recognized permission had been summarily granted to lighten-up and laugh gaily at Tracy’s malapropism. Tracy laughed along – *hah, hah, that certainly was a helluva malapropism, wouldn’t you all agree?* Matt added through cheerful cacophony which had now caught the jealous attention of the people seated at lesser, nearby tables, “I mean, is it even possible to get a tat on your

balls? That might fuck up your sperm, you know. Cause you to squirt ink like a squid.” Matt was on a roll, now. “Assuming you have balls, of course. And I’m not being sexist – don’t look at me like that Taija. I’ve met plenty of women with balls. Bigger balls than mine, even.” Immediately Matt wished he had curtailed his remarks by one sentence. Floating the notion that his manhood might not measure up to that of some women was not the image he wished to advance. He gulped a mouthful of Champagne, and with an arrogant snap of the fingers summoned the waiter – he actually called the middle-aged man “garçon” – from whom he ordered a bottle of Grey Goose and a bottle of Padron. Tracy requested an icy-cold Cointreau and slumped imperceptibly with relief that Matt had thoroughly and efficiently deflected the unwanted attention onto himself.

After dessert – Tracy had Bombolini made from mountain huckleberry compote and vanilla gelato, Matt had Tre Agrumi Ghiacciati: grapefruit sorbetto, Meyer lemon gelato and keylime cannoli – Matt pulled Tracy aside, away from the table, and said, “I don’t know what your master plan is, but I don’t like it. What’s your interest in buying up so much of my stock?”

“Your stock, Matt? Yours? I thought NanoNano was a publicly traded company now.”

Matt pursed his lips and looked up into Tracy’s eyes for a sign. “Are you angling for a board seat? Is that it? Well, we have a very competent board in place already.”

“Chill, Matt. I just think NanoNano is a good investment. I’m considering it merely as that – nothing more. I don’t want to interfere in the nuts and guns of the enterprise. That’s your job.”

Matt didn’t know whether to take that as an insult or a compliment. Tracy’s choice of words – “nuts and guns” as

opposed to “nuts and bolts” – seemed like a snide reference to Matt’s earlier, somewhat lame comment. Matt stared at Tracy for a moment, glanced off to her left, rubbed his chin with his thumb, and then looked back into Tracy’s eyes. He cracked a smile. “You’re hard to read, Tracy Shepard. Can I trust you? What choice do I have?” She smiled as well, and said nothing. Matt took Tracy by the forearm and led her back to the table where he tapped his empty Champagne glass with a butter knife to collect the attention of the entire room. He made a pompous toast to the company and, in a thinly veiled manner, to himself.

Tracy was tired and teetering on the edge of inebriation. She concluded her trip to Los Angeles had been a fool’s errand, and that she had played the part aptly in front of Matt Blankenschein and his minions. *Dice tattooed on some guy’s balls – nice going, Tracy.* She was sure her companions at the table didn’t think for a second she had mistakenly uttered “balls” instead of “biceps,” believing instead she was a garden variety nut job. *Fuck it, who cares?* She stood up abruptly like she always did whenever a meeting or a conference or a social get-together no longer held her interest, and thanked Matt for the hospitality. She wished his company the best of luck and bade farewell to her tablemates. On the way out to retrieve her rental car from the valet, Tracy stopped in the ladies room to take a long overdue pee and freshen up. She was scheduled to be on a 6:45 flight the next morning.

Tracy stepped out from the stall and washed her hands in the elegant sink basin. She admired the fixtures and pondered whether it was time to redo her own bathroom. *I wonder if these faucets are Gessi Rettangolo.* Tracy reached for a towel and examined her face in the mirror. She was momentarily startled

to see Marilyn Jenkins standing directly behind her, shuffling her feet anxiously like a school girl hoping to get called on by the teacher. Tracy turned around uneasily, still drying her hands with the towel. Before she could inquire about Marilyn's sudden presence, the VP of Human Resources for NanoNano announced, "Yes. He *does* have dice tattooed on his balls."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Marilyn and Tracy sat across from one another in a dark corner of the Moroccan Room just inside the Bungalow Club, also situated on Melrose Avenue a half-mile west of Osteria Mozza. Marilyn suggested meeting there alone to discuss this tattoo thing. As a life-long New Yorker, Tracy had expected to walk the seven easy blocks to the bar, looking forward to the mild night air. But Marilyn, like many residents of LA, insisted on driving there instead.

Having imbibed several champagnes and cordials at the NanoNano party, both women arrived at the Bungalow Club too tipsy to reliably assess their level of intoxication, but not so drunk that further intake of alcohol was out of the question. In this state, the women plowed on. Tracy ordered a white wine; Marilyn, a Key Lime Pie Martini.

Tracy wanted to fire a shotgun shell full of questions, but she had sized up Marilyn as the type who would want to speak first, seeking to control the conversation, playing the role of the inquisitor like a typical Personnel Department manager. Tracy had come to LA to excavate like an archaeologist for a clue, however miniscule, to the whereabouts of Fletcher Cuttbate, and now, better than digging up a mere finger bone or a fragment of mandible she had been rewarded with a nearly-complete skeleton. Marilyn's "Calvin" had to be Fletch. *No doubts*. Balls tattooed with dice? Stories of a greedy twin brother? Pumping cures over life-long therapies? *No doubts*. Tracy resolved to negotiate for all the details Marilyn could surrender on Calvin. Tracy knew Marilyn would be averse to sharing information; Personnel execs were inculcated to be hyper-protective of other peoples' personal information. Furthermore, she probably harbored some fond feelings for the man, as Tracy had for Fletch once. And Marilyn would be loath to admit that she had been fooled; that instead of being the angel investor for a breakthrough acromegaly cure, she was the unwitting mark in a complex confidence scheme. Tracy would have to negotiate shrewdly to get all the relevant information out of Marilyn – but who better to undertake the task than Tracy Shepard, the "Medea of Mediation?"

"May I call you Tracy?"

"Certainly – and may I ..."

"Yes, call me Marilyn. Tell me, how did you know about the tattoo? I mean, I don't want to know what you were doing to see such a thing – I can guess, and likewise, you can guess what I was doing. What I mean is – what did I say that caused you blurt out such a crazy question at the table? How do you know Calvin? Did you have an affair with him or something?"

“I don’t know anyone named Calvin. And neither do you. This guy is using an alias. When I knew him he called himself Fletcher Cuttbate. He had a twin, supposedly, but I think he also played the role of the brother, Fischer Cuttbate. What was Calvin’s brother’s name?”

“Collier. Collier Blough.” Rhymes with rough.

“Did you ever meet Collier? What did he look like? Did you ever see them together, y’know, in the same place at the same time?”

“I met Collier a couple of times, but he’s been out of the country for the last few weeks. He looks exactly like his brother Calvin, of course.” Marilyn responded sarcastically. *Identical twin look exactly alike, isn’t that a tautology?* Then she furrowed her brow and frowned. In reality it had never entered her mind until this moment. She continued meekly, “But no. No. I never did see them together, now that you mention it.”

“Listen, Marilyn. You’re in the middle of being conned out of a lot of money.” Tracy felt duty-bound to shake some sense into the woman.

“What makes you say such a thing? That’s an awful thing to assert about someone you don’t know even know. I’ve seen the results of Calvin’s work – his computer printouts – and I’ve spoken to his chief scientist. I’ve done my own research, Tracy. Ron, the one suffering with acromegaly – a man I worked with for more than a year – vouched for Calvin.”

Tracy responded with lawyerly precision and compactness, counting out for emphasis each point with an extended finger. “Computer printouts? Easily fabricated. Chief Scientist? One of Calvin’s stooges. Ron Subytic? I met him during the mediation sessions between NanoNano and PicoTech. Most likely he’s a co-

conspirator. A common thread.”

The aggressively clipped and cocky delivery irritated Marilyn. She adopted a contrarian tone. “That’s quite a conspiracy theory, Tracy. You know what I think? You’re just jealous that your relationship with a man – a different man – didn’t work out, and you’re trying to pin the blame on Calvin.” Tracy narrowed her eyes and stared at Marilyn with thinly-veiled contempt. Marilyn continued, “Matt showed me a magazine where they called you the ‘Medea of Mediation.’ Well, Medea is synonymous with jealousy.”

Reminded once again of the unfortunate label in the *Forbes* article, Tracy fumed that the foolish, snappy alliteration was now attached to her like an errant piece of toilet paper on the sole of her shoe. She took a deep, calming breath. “I’m not jealous, for God’s sake, Marilyn. Not one bit. Forget that whole stupid Medea thing. Listen to me. The story about cures and therapies is a con game. Calvin, or whatever his real name is, wants you to believe he’s on the verge of developing a fantastic new drug that will cure an awful disease, and that he can’t get the funding to proceed with expensive clinical trials. He’s preying on your good nature, inventing a phony twin brother as a foil. How much does he want from you?”

Marilyn looked askance. Tracy could tell the gears in the woman’s head were turning. *Would she dare speak it?* Marilyn scrunched low to the table and in a barely audible voice whispered, “\$250,000.”

“Is that all? He wanted a million from me. And you know what – I gave it to the bastard. A month later, he and his entire charade of a business were gone. Disappeared. No trace. Do you get what I’m saying?”

Marilyn said nothing – she seemed to be in a state of semi-shock. *A million dollars?*

Tracy continued, “You’re a smart woman, Marilyn. That’s obvious. Think – deep down – do you really believe there are two different guys in the world with dice tattooed on their nutsacks? Two different tattooed-balled breakthrough-drug-developers who have identical, greedy twin brothers? And the dice add to seven?”

“Sounds impossible, I must admit.” Marilyn sipped her sweet Martini. “So, what do you want from me, Tracy?” Tracy smiled and touched Marilyn’s hand. The negotiation so far had been productive. Tracy had freely confided in Marilyn two things of great value: a timely warning about imminent fraud, and the personal confession of her own painful, foolish behavior. And in exchange, Tracy would persuade Marilyn to offer back something of greater value: arranging for Tracy to meet once again with Fletcher Cuttbate.

Tracy cancelled her flight back to New York the next morning, concluding it far more important to stay in LA and jawbone some more with Marilyn in the Moroccan Room until all useful information could be harvested. Tracy learned that the Blough brothers worked out of a tiny office in Philadelphia, and that Calvin lived in a small ranch house in Princeton Junction across the Delaware River. The house Marilyn described sounded eerily similar to Fletch Cuttbate’s rundown bungalow in Hamilton Square – a village no more than ten miles from Princeton Junction. When Marilyn mentioned the weird paintings of a naked man, arteries running outside his body from his eyes to his heart, and the fancy electric guitar, Tracy chuckled and shook

her head. “That fucking bastard. What an operator. I suppose he played rock tunes for you – am I right?” She had rejected the Medea label from the start, but at this moment Tracy was seething with jealousy.

“Well, I mentioned I liked *Boston*, and he played ‘More Than a Feeling.’”

A ripple of unalloyed hatred ran through Tracy as she recalled singing along with Fletch. “Jesus Christ. OK. I’ve heard enough. Calvin is Fletcher Cuttbate. Do you believe me now?”

Marilyn responded for the first time with conviction and some resignation, “Yes, I have to admit I’m convinced.”

Tracy raised her glass to Marilyn as if preparing a toast, but said nothing. Marilyn lifted hers as well. Tracy took a drink and casually surveyed the bar area. She noticed how the subdued yellow candle-light flickering atop the several tiny tables cast jerky shadows across the billowy fabric trussed up on the ceiling. It was time for a break from negotiations.

“This is a nice place, Marilyn. Do you come here often?”

“I used to but not in the last year since I broke up with my boyfriend. Now I mostly work long hours. The six months before the IPO were brutal. We were staffing like crazy.”

Tracy and Marilyn chatted for 30 minutes about growing up, their college days, work, travel. The small talk rolled on. When Tracy believed Marilyn was suitably relaxed, she offhandedly asked, “When are you going to meet Calvin again?”

“Never. Not after this.”

“I mean, when would you have met him again if you hadn’t found out what a scumbag he is?”

“No solid plans, but he said he’d take me to dinner the next time I’m in Philadelphia. He bragged about some place near

Rittenhouse Square called Davio's. Have you ever heard of it?"

Tracy wrote some words on a piece of paper – her email and phone number – and passed it to Marilyn. "Take this. Now, listen carefully. I want you to accept Calvin's swell invitation – try to meet him in the next ten days. Make sure he takes you back to his place in Princeton Junction after dinner. And make sure he drinks a lot. I want him semi-drunk."

Marilyn looked confused. "I don't und ..."

"I need you to help me reconnect with Fletch, Calvin, whatever. I need to see him again. To get some restitution from him. To get him to confess to his crimes. To put an end this unfunny comedy of errors."

Marilyn scratched the back of her neck and started to nibble on a cuticle. She sipped her drink. She appeared unwilling to engage this line of conversation.

Tracy pressed, "I need your help. Please."

"I don't want to get involved," snapped Marilyn.

Tracy shot back, "Hell, Marilyn, you *are* involved! You're vulnerable! We both need to bring this bastard to justice!" She immediately scolded herself for getting agitated, especially when a few nearby patrons abruptly stopped conversing among themselves and looked over to size up the outburst. Tracy sat back in her chair so that the red velvet curtain hanging by the booth obscured her face from the gawkers.

Quietly, but forcefully, Marilyn challenged, "Why don't you just call in the police or the FBI? Why do you have to meet him in person?"

Revenge, bitch! Lex Talionis! Calmer now, Tracy spoke methodically, "He's a con artist, Marilyn. A very good con artist. He and his cronies left no tracks. I've been to the FBI already –

they're stumped. Even if I turned him over, they might let him go for lack of evidence. I've got to get him to confess on tape." The look on Marilyn's face suggested she began to comprehend the logic of it all.

"How are you going to get him to confess?" asked Marilyn, intrigued.

"I'm a professional negotiator. I'll negotiate for his confession."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Step two of Marilyn's part in Tracy's plan to ensnare Fletcher Cuttbate (aka. Calvin Blough) was complete: the man was drunk. He had succumbed to the copious amounts of alcohol consumed during step one of the plan: enjoying a luscious dinner at Davio's accompanied by his new favorite benefactor, Marilyn Jenkins. A week earlier, Marilyn put step one in motion by calling Calvin to tell him she would be attending a technology conference in Washington, DC, and if his offer was still on the table she would love to have dinner with him in Philadelphia. She implied vaguely that she might be bringing along a check for a large sum of money – a first installment meant to accelerate the development of Calvin's miraculous acromegaly cure. When Calvin inquired whether she could come to Philadelphia before the conference, her

suspicions about him intensified. It lent additional credibility to Tracy's accusations that he was solely interested in relieving her of her money.

"I gotta take a leak, Marilyn. Man, I'm pretty smashed. I hope you can drive," slurred Calvin who hesitantly arose from his chair. "I'll be back in a minute – get the check from the waiter, will ya?" Calvin weaved his way to the men's room around the corner from the slick bar – the third time since dinner was served. And each time he left for the can, Marilyn dumped her vodka-tonic into the potted plant next to their two-top and replaced it with bottled water. Through this ruse, Marilyn slowly and incrementally consumed just three mixed drinks to Calvin's nine Wild Turkey Manhattans. She pretended to be more inebriated than she really was; still, Calvin remarked at her tremendous ability to hold her liquor. Unless the bastard passed out in the men's room, step three would soon be underway: traveling to Calvin's house for a bit of after-dinner hanky-panky. To this point, Marilyn found the setup strangely exciting – sort of like playing "cops n' robbers" or "secret agent." After overcoming her initial uptight repulsion to participating in Tracy's scheme, Marilyn fancied herself a modern-day Mata Hari. But as the inevitable trip back to Calvin's home neared, she had trepidations. *Wasn't Mata Hari executed by firing squad?*

Marilyn asked the waiter to bring one more Manhattan for Mr. Blough and a seltzer for herself, and the bill. Five minutes later he arrived with the drinks and a check totaling \$575 – the drinks alone accounted for \$200 of the damage. Calvin walked behind the waiter to the table, and when he spotted him setting down another round, he said loudly, "What the fuck is this, Marilyn? I can't drink another one."

Marilyn puckered her lips seductively and raised an eyebrow. She took a sip of her seltzer and cooed, "Are you sure, baby?"

"Well, maybe one more." He said with resignation in his voice. "But this is the last one."

"OK, baby. It's just that I want to savor the moment. This is such a nice place you've brought me to, and it's been such a nice evening so far ..." Marilyn let her sentence trail off, suggesting more fun was in the offing. Calvin took a drink and grinned lewdly at Marilyn. "You're a – *errrp* – vixen, y'know that?" Marilyn maintained her sexy countenance even though she feared Calvin might throw up all over the table at any moment.

About an hour later, Marilyn drove her rental car into Calvin's driveway. He had taken New Jersey Transit to meet her in downtown Philly, figuring he might get too drunk to drive home. The evening air was fresh and crisp, and with the car window rolled down Calvin gained some relief during the ride from Rittenhouse Square to Princeton Junction. In fact, it appeared to Marilyn that Calvin had modestly recovered his bearings; he wasn't quite as sloppy as he had been at Davio's. Clearly, the man possessed a professional liver.

Calvin fumbled with his keys before finally opening his front door. Marilyn stood beside him, nervous about initiating step four.

"Come in, come in, my dear. The water's fine." Calvin's eyes were bloodshot slits and his cheeks were flush. His pants hung loosely around his hips and both shoes were untied. Calvin was a mess, but after ten Manhattans what else would a rational observer expect of the man?

As soon as the couple was safely inside the house, Calvin

pivoted clumsily and embraced Marilyn. He planted a sloppy kiss on Marilyn's lips and mauled her tits with his left hand. His breath smelled sickly sweet of bourbon and red vermouth. Marilyn resisted the overwhelming urge to recoil. Instead she forced her hand against his crotch and said in a hoarse whisper, "Why don't you get ready for bed, Cal, and I'll freshen up a bit. I missed you."

"Whatever y'say, Mare. I missed you too." Calvin slipped off his belt and kicked off his shoes, one of which struck a floor lamp. As he ambled to the bedroom, his pants fell around his ankles revealing his pale legs. Marilyn went into the bathroom and locked the door. She washed her face and hands. Her pulse rate soared. She stared into the flaking mirror as though she were about to cross-examine herself, questioning the wisdom of finishing out her role as best supporting actress in Tracy's screenplay. Deciding it was too late to back out, she flushed the toilet and called Tracy.

"Where are you?" queried Marilyn.

"Right where I'm supposed to be – parked next to your car. Your directions were impeccable. By the way, I saw you and Mr. Shitface go into the house. Where are you now?"

"He's in the bedroom; I'm in the bathroom. You better be ready, because even though he's really drunk, he's still able to get around pretty well."

"I'll be ready – is the door unlocked?"

"Yes. I made sure."

Marilyn walked tentatively from the bathroom, taking one last glance at herself in the mirror. She looked ready – as ready as she was going to be. She took a deep breath and shut off the

light.

Calvin's room was dark. The only available light emanated from a cheap plastic digital alarm clock on the table next to the bed, but it was luminous enough for Marilyn to spot a pile of clothes on the floor. She strode to the side of the bed and sat on the mattress next to Calvin. He was spread out, naked and aroused. "What – *errrp* – took you s'long, Mare. I got a killer hard-on."

Disgusted by Calvin's nauseating burping and drunken crudeness, Marilyn wondered how she had gotten tangled up with the man in the first place. Yes, he had been charming in a simple-minded way, and he had a knack for instilling in her a sense of protectiveness for him. When he confided in her the existence of the acromegaly cure, it made her feel special, that he trusted her enough to reveal his secret research to her. Presently, it amazed her that she had allowed herself to become all motherly, especially after her marriage to an immature college drop-out ten years her junior had broken up over his protests against her well-intentioned guidance on how to run his life. Perhaps it was an immutable part of her control-freak personality to be attracted to needy men. Now, sitting on the side of the bed, watching Calvin rub his cock like a semi-conscious primate, and recalling the pair of dice tattooed on his shriveled scrotum, Marilyn could only shake her head in disappointment. Disappointment that she had allowed herself to be lured into a trap by a shifty hustler, a charlatan.

Calvin reached for Marilyn's leg. "How come you're not undressed?"

Marilyn hesitated a moment, then bent down and collected all Calvin's clothes from the floor, including his pants which

held his wallet and cellphone.

“I have to go. Goodbye, Calvin.” Marilyn turned and walked briskly out the bedroom to the front door.

“Wha’ th’hell, Mare? Wha’d I do? D’I do sump’n wrong?” Calvin rolled out of bed and banged his shin on a small space heater. “Fuck! Fuckin’ fuck that hurts!” At the sound of the front door slamming shut he screamed out, “Come back, Marilyn!” Too tired and drunk to give chase, Calvin sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed his shin. He muttered to himself, “What the fuck’s wrong wi’tha’ bitch?”

“The better question would be ‘what the fuck is wrong with you’? Hello, Fletch. How’s the head?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

In the bedroom doorway, silhouetted by a dim hallway light, stood Tracy Shepard, all 73 inches of her shapely yet imposing frame perched atop a new pair of Bruno Magli Sulzano heels. “Aren’t you going to say ‘hello’ Fletch?” She advanced toward him. “Don’t you miss me?”

Fletch was startled into frozen cognitive dissonance, unable to speak. He knew immediately that the unannounced visitor was his old pal Tracy, but as he had never before been confronted by a mark after the con blew off, Fletch was unprepared for her arrival back into his life. After a moment, Fletch said flatly, “What d’ya want, Tracy? Why’re you here?”

“I think you know why. Stand up and turn on the light.”

“I’m goin’ t’ bed. I’m tired and little drunk. Lock the door on your way out, please.” Fletch flopped back onto the bed and

exhaled long and loudly.

Tracy flicked on the switch by the doorway illuminating the room from a ceiling light; Fletch covered his eyes. “Shut that off!”

“I said, stand up you misogynist piece of shit.”

Although Fletch was one – a “misogynist piece of shit” – no one had ever referred to him that way. *Misogynist? What’s that?* He sat up and faced Tracy. He was about to tell her to go fuck herself, but changed his mind at the sight of her semi-automatic gun pointed at his head. “Easy, Tracy. Shit. What d’ya want? Your million dollars? I don’t have it – I don’t even have half of it. It got split up and spent. I’m sorry, but that’s the way it is.”

Tracy smiled. “I expected nothing else.” She glanced around the room, spotting an easel holding up a painting of a man with anatomically correct aortas emerging from his eye sockets. “I see you’re still ripping off Frida Kahlo, Fletch.”

“Why are you here pointing a gun at me?”

“Stand up.” Fletch hesitantly complied. “I came here to negotiate. To negotiate for something that could make us whole again. Complete the transaction. You took a lot of money from me and didn’t hold up your end of the bargain. That wasn’t nice, Fletch.” From the confused look on Fletch’s face, Tracy knew he was off-balance, unprepared. He was clearly wasted. She continued, “I read somewhere that Keith Richards’ middle finger is insured for \$1.6 million. Did you know that? One point six mil. I’m sure you do, given that you’re such a big fan.” Tracy stepped to the end of the bed and tossed a paper bag onto the mattress in front of Fletch. It bounced, suggesting heft. “Open the bag, Fletch.”

Fletcher hesitated before reaching for the sack. He had no

idea what Tracy was talking about. *Keith Richards' middle finger? One point six mil?* Tracy maintained a bead on Fletch's head. As he opened the bag and peered inside at the contents, Tracy said, "You're a very good guitar player, Fletch. I really enjoyed your performance that day in Jersey at your – it *was* yours, wasn't it? – your bungalow. You know, you may be as good a guitarist as Keith Richards – maybe better – but your middle finger isn't possibly worth as much as his. In fact your whole hand isn't worth as much as his finger. Still, I'm willing to accept a finger in exchange for the \$1 million you stole from me." Fletch removed a brand new pair of offset snips from the bag, the kind used for cutting sheet metal, and looked at Tracy in horror. He stared for several seconds, waiting for a chuckle or a grin from her, some sign that this was all a sick joke perpetrated by a justifiably aggrieved but essentially sane person.

Fletch didn't know it, for Tracy maintained a dispassionate, determined expression on her face belying no evidence of fooling around, but the sheet metal cutters were in fact part of a mind game, a sick joke. Tracy intended to upset Fletch with her demand to lop off his finger, and when he flat-out refused as she knew he would, she would coerce him into confessing his crimes in front of a digital video camera she brought to the scene. Tracy believed Fletch, intoxicated and forced at gunpoint to use the snippers on his finger, would opt to tell his con game story.

"Place the tool on your middle finger, Fletch. Do it now." Tracy extended her arm straight out, bringing the gun closer to Fletch's face.

"Listen, Trace ..."

"Put the fucking shears on your fucking finger. Now!" She cocked the trigger.

Fletch cowered at the sound of the hammer clicking into position, and he nervously opened the snippers. *Is this bitch serious?* He began to convulse, puking up a gusher of liquor and masticated meat all over his legs and feet.

Disgusted, Tracy grimaced, fearing she might vomit too. She commanded loudly, “Put the cutters on your finger, you worthless piece of shit!”

As he slid his finger into the jaw of the steel hand tool he whimpered, “fucking bitch, fucking bitch.” The well-honed edge superficially sliced into his skin. He stood there, shaking, completely naked, his hair tussled, chunks of partially-digested food splattered on his shins, gripping the snippers in his right hand gingerly about the middle finger of his left. His once-erect penis was now shrunken and desiccated like a dead mouse. Tracy faced Fletch, holding the gun steadily in both hands. Her legs were spread slightly for stability. Three feet separated the two. Tracy said nothing, communicated nothing. Seconds passed. Fletch started to suspect – hope, maybe – that she was playing a mind-game after all. He opened his mouth to speak, but Tracy interrupted him.

“Cut it off, Fletch. It’s a good deal. You owe me a million dollars, plus interest, but I’ll take your finger instead. That, or I can lodge a bullet in your cranium if you prefer. As a negotiator, I always like to offer my clients options.”

Tracy’s flippancy toward him as he stood like a vomit-fouled fool incensed Fletch. He railed, “You’re a cunt, you know that? A worthless cunt. You’re angry at yourself – not at me – because you wanted to be the big hero, and instead you fell for a scam like a stupid schoolgirl. Tracy the bigtime hero – curing diseases, proving your worth to your old, doddering father. Hah! I owe

you nothing, cunt!”

Fletch’s insinuation that she had brought this upon herself momentarily disarmed her – *could there be a scintilla of truth to his accusation?* – but his reference to her “old, doddering father” enraged her.

“Cut off your fucking finger now or I will kill you!” Tracy sternly ordered. The plan was not unfolding exactly as Tracy expected, but she believed she still controlled the situation. She’d let Fletch stew another few seconds, then offer him the alternative of confessing. That’s what she had come to collect, what she wanted all along: a video-taped confession to turn over to the FBI. She only hoped she hadn’t gone too postal with the demands for self-inflicted amputation.

Fletch screamed out in terror, “Please! Don’t make me do it!” And with that, as Tracy was about to capitulate and segue into her alternative demand for a simple, honest confession, Fletch lunged at her with the sheet metal cutters. Although he was seriously drunk – or perhaps because of it – Fletch decided to make a fast move to disarm Tracy and gain the upper hand. Under no circumstances could Fletch bring himself to cut off his own finger – that was a foregone conclusion – and as time transpired he suspected Tracy was bluffing. Bluffing about using the cutters and about pulling the trigger. Hell, she probably never fired a gun in her life, thought Fletch. *Is the fucking gun even loaded?*

Is the fucking gun even loaded? Tracy would have had to answer sheepishly, truthfully, “No.” She had reinserted the empty magazine into her father’s old M1911 semi-automatic, convinced that the unloaded gun would nonetheless serve her well as a threatening prop. So she was shocked beyond recognition when

the gun discharged a 45 caliber round – the one in the chamber she never knew was there – into Fletch’s Adam’s apple; the round that then passed through his spinal column between the cervical and thoracic regions, and continued out his body into the plasterboard wall inches below the print of Kandinsky’s *Two Riders and Reclining Figure*. Tracy hadn’t planned to pull the trigger under any circumstances, but Fletch’s abrupt, threatening attack with the cruelly sharp sheet metal cutters forced an involuntary reaction out of her. She recoiled at his thrust and tightened her muscles, including those in the hand that held the weapon. And now Fletch was mortally wounded. His forward momentum caused him to fall into Tracy who stumbled backward. His dead body crumpled into a heap on the carpet. A wheezy gurgling sound emanated from the hole in his throat. Moments later, the sound moderated to a hiss, and then all went silent.

Tracy dropped the pistol and stared aghast at the body. She stooped down and reached out toward his neck to feel for a pulse, but stopped short in terror. *What if he lunges for me like the last scene in Carrie?* She waited a few minutes and tried again, but this time, instead of physically touching the body, she placed a compact mirror from her purse under his nose. After a good 90 seconds in which no telltale breath appeared on the glass surface, Tracy concluded that Fletch Cuttbate was undeniably and reliably dead. And then she rushed into the bathroom and threw up in the sink. She ran some water, blotted her face, and threw up again. After several minutes paralyzed in sheer mind-reeling panic, Tracy sat on the toilet and addressed herself in the third person. As calmly as possible: “Gotta think, Trace, think. Think, Goddammit!”

Marilyn is long-gone, thank God. She had walked past Tracy on

the way out Fletch's front door, nodding to indicate "so far, so good," tossed Fletch's clothes into Tracy's rental car, and bolted for her hotel in Philadelphia where she awaited Tracy's call to report status. *Did anyone hear the gunshot?* Doubtful. Fletch's house was situated far from the others in the neighborhood, and besides the report was not as loud as Tracy had would have expected; gunshots in the movies and on TV cop dramas were always so noisy. *Would an associate of Fletch's come looking for him soon?* Perhaps. Tracy decided to err on the side of paranoia, making no assumptions about how a soulless conman like Fletch might operate. It wouldn't surprise her if, after making drunken love to his mark, he would meet up later with a co-conspirator and laugh over the carnal details. And so, seated on the bowl, elbows on her knees and head cradled in her hands, Tracy resolved to conjure up a very tight tale – *right this instant* – that would forever protect her from implication in the untimely deaths of Calvin Blough and his brother Collier, and their colleagues, Fletcher and Fischer Cuttbate. She slowly walked back into the bedroom with squeamish trepidation of seeing Fletch's limp, supine body lying in a massive pool of blood. Again, the movies – they always seemed to portray gunshot victims floating in gallons of red goop. In fact, he looked as though he was asleep, albeit fitfully, on the floor. There was almost no blood on the carpet. Fletch's face looked pained; one eye was partly open. The body exhibited no obvious indications of foul play other than a small red dot on the throat – and the fact that he still clutched the sheet metal cutters. That certainly appeared sinister. Fletcher's face was flushed and his slightly-spread legs were spattered with puke. Tracy inspected the body from a variety of angles. She walked around so that she was in a position to look straight down at

him. That's when she spotted the dice tattooed on his balls, and suddenly an idea gelled in her mind. From this vantage point Fletch looked like a genuine pervert; a psycho who might have tried to violate a feisty young girl, and suffered fatally for his proclivity for sexual intemperance.

Tracy retraced her steps through the house, improvising her next and hopefully last piece of the plan. She returned to Fletch's bedroom. She bent over the body and with her long, manicured fingernails gouged some nasty, deep scrapes into his cheeks, biceps and chest. Having violated a corpse and feeling no remorse for it, she placed her spike heel onto the seam of his nutsack and pressed down hard, tearing the wrinkly skin between the three and the four. It seemed an equitable exchange for the supple footjob she performed on him that evening after dining at Per Se. *Now he really looks like a sex offender who got what's coming to him.*

Tracy circulated the place for one final inspection. She wiped off the gun, placed it in her purse, and carefully walked out the door to her car. On the passenger seat rested Fletch's clothes, stashed there earlier by Marilyn, along with his wallet and cellphone. Tracy would need these things to complete her exit strategy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A little more than a half-mile from Fletch's house Tracy pulled her rental car off the dark street and onto a desolate utility road leading into a tall, thick stand of trees on state land. She was relieved that Fletch's cellphone was picking up a strong signal. She would have only a few minutes to make a critical call. Tracy took off her expensive shoes, stepped out of the rented vehicle and for three solid minutes performed a rapid succession of jumping-jacks. Sufficiently winded, she donned a pair of gloves and walked barefoot a few steps farther into the woods. With her face eerily illuminated from below by the open cellphone, Tracy placed a call.

"911 – What's your emergency?"

In her best young-woman voice, Tracy panted, "I need help! I just shot a guy who tried to rape me! I don't know where I am!"

“Calm down dear. You say you shot someone? Is he dead?”

“I don’t know! I’m not sure! I’m afraid he might come after me!” Because Tracy was still wired up from killing Fletch and had just done 120 jumping-jacks her voice sounded genuinely distressed, frightened and panicked.

“OK, dear. OK. Where are you? Where do you think you are?”

“I ran out of his house into the woods after he attacked me. Now I’m lost.”

“Stay where you are and leave your cellphone on. We can track you with it. What’s your name?”

“Tiffany. And it’s not my cellphone. I took it from him after he tried to rape me. He picked me up hitchhiking. He was drunk and had a gun. He forced me to go with him. He tried to attack me with a big pair of scissors. I shot him with his own gun.”

“How old are you dear?”

“Sixteen ...” *Click.* Tracy decided the conversation had gone on long enough – no doubt soon local law enforcement would begin converging on her whereabouts. She dropped the phone, still powered on, onto a bed of pine needles blanketing the ground, and sped away from the scene. She drove 50 miles to Camden, NJ – one of the most crime-ridden cities in America, at times capturing the top spot for murders-per-capita – and when she passed through a particularly seedy section she tossed Fletch Cuttbate’s wallet out the window. From there she drove non-stop to Manhattan, dropped off the rental car and rode a taxi back to Sutton Place.

Tracy drew a hot bath and reviewed the evening’s festivities. If all went according to Tracy’s ad-libbed plan, the police would track the cellphone to the woody area which would validate

“Tiffany’s” description of the location. Perhaps they would conclude the young female 911 caller was a runaway, a homeless drifter, a prostitute – that might explain why she left the scene after calling for help. *Such a poor waif would naturally fear the police.* And if Fletch’s wallet somehow surfaced in down-and-out Camden, then its presence in a crappy section of America’s crime capital might lend credence to the theory that the girl lived on the street. She might never be identified.

Would the police trace the cellphone to Fletch? Or had he engineered a crafty scam to prevent his identity from being associated with it? In any event, given the small number of homes in the neighborhood, the authorities would have little trouble stumbling upon Fletch’s dead body – a brute-force search of all the homes inside a mile radius of the stand of trees where the cellphone was abandoned would be sufficient. Once there, the police would find a victim consistent with Tiffany’s agitated 911 report: a dead body shot once through the neck and marred by what would appear to be defensive wounds. The corpse would still be gripping the “big pair of scissors” with which he apparently attacked the poor girl – no wonder she shot him. Purely self-defense. And check out his scrotum – festooned with a pair of dice. Who but a sex maniac would defile his genitals in such a debauched fashion?

Satisfied all was well with the world, Tracy stepped into the tub and slowly immersed into the steamy, lavender-infused water. Minutes earlier she phoned Marilyn to report cryptically, “mission accomplished – got the video before he passed out.” Marilyn simply replied, “Thank God,” and hung up.

Tracy had some belated misgivings about spiking Fletch’s balls with her pointy heel. In retrospect it seemed unusually

cruel. *What would an investigator make of it?* Hopefully, the wound would be construed as evidence of a kinky sex act that spun out of control and precipitated the altercation.

While fashioning her exit plan at Fletch's place, Tracy considered what to do with the gun. It seemed more probable that Fletch's assault victim would have left it behind rather than take it with her, but as Tracy was the only person to have handled the weapon she had two sub-optimal choices: wipe the gun and leave it there without any fingerprints, a suspicious scenario indeed, or leave the scene with the weapon. In her line of work, Tracy was used to dealing with the lesser of two mediocre options. The latter choice sized out to be the better move in her opinion. Again, with luck the missing weapon would not scotch the investigation. *Wasn't it reasonable that a scared, defenseless victim might take the gun?* It made no difference now, anyway. Tracy had already flung her father's pistol into the Hudson River as she crossed the center span of the George Washington Bridge on her long drive home.

It had been an extraordinarily long, exhausting day. The hot bath provided soothing relief and helped Tracy decompress a bit. As time passed, she became more and more confident that the authorities would summarily close the accidental killing of Fletch Cuttbate as an act of self-defense by an anonymous young street walker. Tracy also held out hope that the police, in the course of trying to identify the dead man, would connect Fletch to a compendium of unsolved scams and con games, and rationalize his demise. She took a sip of icy Cointreau and smiled. The whole affair turned out better than anything she could have planned.

After her bath, Tracy donned a fluffy terrycloth robe,

climbed into bed and turned on the television. A local channel broadcast a brief report about a shooting in Princeton Junction. Tracy gasped and sat up. She turned up the volume. The reporter mentioned a 911 call from a young prostitute claiming to have shot an attacker, but that the authorities had found no evidence yet that a crime had actually been perpetrated. A police spokesman stated that his team had tracked the caller's cellphone to an isolated strip of trees on state land, but so far had not made contact with the caller. The spokesman could not rule out a prank call.

Tracy went to the kitchen, removed a frigid bottle of Ketel One from the freezer and poured herself a stiff one. The coming days would be a bitch. She had one last task to complete: lowering the cone of silence on Marilyn Jenkins.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The same black gate agent who had served up a heaping helping of grief to Tracy the morning she first met Fischer Cuttbate accepted Tracy's boarding pass – seat 1B – for the non-stop flight to LA. “Welcome, Ma'am,” said the agent cheerfully. Tracy eyed her suspiciously, prepared to receive a snide double-entendre or a cocky facial expression, but it didn't happen. No doubt, thought Tracy, the uppity Delta employee had encountered hundreds of thousands of travelers in the year and change since the original incident. Surely the agent's recollections of a tête-à-tête with one particular customer had faded long ago. Then just as Tracy advanced toward the jetway, the agent added, “Glad to see you have your own ticket this time, Ma'am.” Tracy froze – *insolent fucking bitch!* – but in a post-9/11 world, she could do or say nothing

in retaliation. *Insolent fucking bitch!* Tracy plodded on through the jetway to her seat in the front of the aircraft and drafted a scathing letter to the CEO of Delta Airlines.

Tracy was traveling to Southern California to have lunch and conversation with Marilyn Jenkins, VP of Human Relations and shaky co-conspirator – though she didn't know it yet – in the untimely death of the man who scammed one and sought to do the same to the other. The previous day, Tracy had called Marilyn again, this time reporting that everything had worked out well, that Fletch had confessed to his crimes in front of her digital video camera. Relieved, Marilyn was eager to learn more about the surprise encounter. "I'll bet he shit his pants when you walked into the bedroom," laughed Marilyn. "Oh wait, he wasn't wearing pants ..." After the requisite insertion of light levity, Marilyn started prying for details of Tracy's plan to turn over the evidence to the FBI.

"I'd rather not get into it over the phone. Listen, I'm coming out to the West Coast tomorrow to meet with Matt. Let's have lunch and I'll tell you all about my negotiation with Mr. Shitface. I have to congratulate you Marilyn – you did a hell of a job getting him drunk. He was wobbling all over the place. It was a snap to get him to sing for the camera."

Marilyn laughed again, "He must have two livers because he drank at least ten drinks and was still able to keep vertical." After a moment of silence, Marilyn added, "OK, Tracy. Lunch. Tomorrow. I'll pick a nice place. Have a safe flight."

Tracy's meeting with Matt Blankenshein was cordial and, contrary to his initial expectations, non-confrontational. Tracy informed Matt that following the IPO party she changed her

mind about organizing a coalition to buy up a large block of shares, opting instead to invest a modest quarter-million dollars in a personal stake. She had one request that she floated as more of a suggestion.

“What’s that Tracy?” inquired Matt.

“Your exec team is entirely male. NanoNano seems to be run by your fraternity brothers – at least that’s the view from the outside. That’s not going to work well for you, especially when you try to branch into female-oriented market segments. Y’know, cosmetics for example.” From reading about nanotechnology Tracy learned that such exotic components as synthetic polymers and colloids stood to revolutionize the cosmetics industry.

Matt stroked his chin, an affected gesture he practiced to enhance the appearance of gravitas, and responded, “That’s an excellent suggestion, Tracy. I’ll look into it.”

“The easiest move to make, Matt, is to elevate one of your female execs to a position of higher responsibility. It’ll inspire your lower level employees, and takes no more effort than simply redrawing the org chart. Anyway, thanks for meeting with me, Matt. I wish you the best of luck.” Tracy brought up the subject of female advancement in NanoNano because she expected Marilyn to demand something for her compliance with Tracy’s soon-to-be-revealed cover-up plan. Again, Gordon Rule’s book provided guidance: “Try to anticipate opposing views and reactions.” Tracy chuckled to herself. *One of your female execs? There’s only one!*

Matt escorted Tracy to the lobby and complimented her on her shoes. Tracy noted that Matt seemed to have matured significantly since the IPO party where he carried on like a ne’er-do-well son of privilege. He behaved more like a CEO

and a gentleman this time. After Matt returned to his spacious corner office on the fourth floor, Tracy walked the several blocks to The Foundry to meet Marilyn. Standing up for New York City virtues, she eschewed riding there in a taxi. Through the plate glass window Tracy spotted Marilyn waiting alone at the bar and sipping from a tall, pinkish drink. Not quite ready to engage in a difficult and awkward discussion, Tracy apprehensively paced the sidewalk for a couple minutes smoking a cigarette and considering the best ways to keep Marilyn from freaking out and going ballistic. Finally, when Tracy decided no further benefit would accrue from remaining outside she entered the restaurant.

“Marilyn. So nice to see you again.” The two women shook hands and exchanged air-kisses. “I can’t thank you enough for helping me with Fletch, or Calvin, whatever.” Tracy sat on the barstool next to Marilyn and ordered a Martinez, a straight-up cocktail that was concocted well before the now-ubiquitous Martini, a tasty drink made with gin – Tracy requested Hendrick’s – sweet vermouth, maraschino liqueur, a dash of Angostura bitters, and a lemon twist. Marilyn, dressed in a sensible pantsuit in a shade between taupe and ecru, nursed a Dirty Shirley. Several businessmen occupied nearby stools.

“How did your meeting go with Matt?” asked Marilyn with a wisp of jealousy. It had been several months since Matt had graced Marilyn with a one-on-one meeting. Human Resources, she decided, was not one of Matt’s big priorities.

Tracy replied, “Very well. We had a really nice conversation, and he was most cordial – he didn’t even bring up the ‘tattooed nutsack incident,’ as I now refer to it.” Tracy chuckled and took a sip of her cocktail, as did Marilyn. A waiter stepped between

the women and set a plate of slimy-looking food on the bar. “Compliments of the chef, ladies. Mustard glazed pork belly, green lentils, eggplant caviar, and plums. Enjoy.”

Although Tracy exhibited a façade of calm and collectedness, inside she was nervous over the prospect of telling Marilyn the truth about the untimely death of the man she had reluctantly helped Tracy locate. With her stomach in a flutter there was no way she could consume pork belly. Especially not pork belly slathered in gelatinous mustard sauce. Marilyn, on the other hand, speared one and stuffed it in her mouth.

“I didn’t have time for breakfast this morning,” explained Marilyn apologetically. She picked up another chunk of belly and devoured it like a hungry dog, chomping the flesh a couple times and swallowing it mostly whole. “I hope I don’t spoil my appetite. The lunches here are awesome and I’d hate to spoil my appetite.” Marilyn reached for another.

Just then Tracy decided it would be best to inform Marilyn of the news while she happily indulged in the porcine delicacy. “Uh, Marilyn – I’ve got something to tell you about my encounter with Fletch ... uh, Calvin. Whatever.” Tracy exhaled heavily, “Things didn’t go exactly quite as planned.” She sipped her delicious Martinez.

Marilyn glanced over at Tracy casually; her expression suggested that she expected to be told of a trivial divergence from the original report – that Calvin basically confessed his transgressions after succumbing to Tracy’s inimitable negotiation techniques. Marilyn said nothing.

Tracy continued, “Now be cool, Marilyn. Calvin, Fletch. They’re ... I mean, he’s dead. I shot him. I had to shoot him.”

Marilyn stopped chewing, and her eyes widened. She

resembled a solitary chipmunk on I95 transfixed by oncoming headlights, the pouches of her mouth engorged with acorn chunks. It took a moment, but she finally forced down the last bite of belly. “Wha ... what? You ... killed him?” Marilyn spoke a bit too loudly for intimate conversation. The bored bartender looked up from washing glasses, intrigued at what he hoped might be the beginning of a provocative discussion involving crime and revenge.

Tracy clutched Marilyn’s forearm and commanded quietly but firmly, “Be cool, Marilyn. Jesus, do you want the whole place to hear you?” Marilyn remained flabbergasted. Tracy pressed on, “I know this is unsettling ...”

“Unsettling? You call this ‘unsettling?’” Marilyn yanked her arm from Tracy’s grip.

“Listen. I tried to reason with that fucking bastard, but instead of working with me he attacked me. He lunged at me with a knife ... a sharp object. Do you understand? He tried to kill me. It was self-defense. I thought in his drunken condition he would be easy to handle, but he caught me off-guard. I had no choice, Marilyn. Do you understand? No choice.”

Marilyn blankly rocked her head from side to side – Tracy perceived it as a blend of disbelief and disapproval. Tracy really didn’t care whether Marilyn approved or not, but she had to ensure Marilyn wouldn’t do something crazy, like contacting the cops, or confessing to an analyst, or calling in an anonymous tip. Marilyn spoke slowly, robotically, “I ... don’t ... know, Tracy. This is serious. You know I didn’t want to get involved from the beginning. I told you that a million times. Now you’ve connected me to a homicide.”

Tracy arched her eyebrows. *Homicide? That sounds a little*

too dramatic. Interpreting Tracy's facial expression as a sign of disagreement with her choice of terms, Marilyn responded, "OK, I know, I know – self-defense. But even if you did kill him in self-defense, everyone's going to think you killed him for revenge. Revenge for scamming you out of a million dollars. And in two seconds, they'll connect me to the crime too – another ditzzy broad who was sucked into one of his scams. It looks bad, Tracy. Bad."

Tracy took it as a hopeful sign that Marilyn would not completely go off the reservation when she gulped the remainder of her Dirty Shirley and asked the bartender to bring another round. Marilyn asked, "What were you doing there with a gun anyway?"

Good question. "Doesn't matter. It's under control, Marilyn. I have it completely under my thumb. The police think he was killed by an underage prostitute. No one's going to connect us to Fletch's death. I've been monitoring the local news, and that's the way the winds are prevailing. We were never there, Marilyn. We're two successful female executives with better things to do than consort with a slug like Fletch Cuttbate. Let's not descend into a folie à deux. The only thing that could hurt us now is for you to go blood simple, Marilyn. I need your cooperation."

Marilyn sat upright at the arrival of the bartender. She had stopped paying attention at "folly-a-doo," whatever the hell that was. She sampled her Dirty Shirley – it tasted even better than the first two. Her facial expression morphed ever-so-slightly from one of unmoored panic to serene confidence, as though she had just realized she had the upper hand. Marilyn remained silent for quite a long time, drinking her cocktail. Tracy found it difficult to read Marilyn. *What is this bitch thinking?* Finally,

as Tracy had expected, Marilyn said with a sly grin, “You’re a professional negotiator, Tracy. Negotiate for my cooperation.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

 ne year later, dressed in elegant Vera Wang, Tracy sat down at a large table in the center of the Marine Room, a landmark restaurant within the La Jolla Beach and Tennis Club complex offering dramatic views of the Pacific Ocean. It wasn't far from the new, expanded San Diego headquarters of NanoNano. Matt Blankenshein, her fiancé of three months, proudly held the chair for her.

After spending more time with him, Tracy had come around to the notion that Matt wasn't such a goof after all. In fact, he had matured nicely since taking the reins of a bona-fide corporate endeavor. The frat-boy shit was gone and in its place was a temperate, sophisticated, professional approach to business and life.

A few months after the “tattooed nutsack incident,” Tracy and

Matt unexpectedly encountered one another at a gala dinner event celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Guggenheim Museum. Newly super-rich Matt had made a sizable donation to the museum's Acquisition Committee and received a seat on the International Director's Council. Matt came to the 50th anniversary event accompanied by his sister, having recently shed his porno girlfriend as part of his professional make-over. Tracy came with her father. She was there as a member of the advisory board and also because she had loaned her Kandinsky as part of a retrospective of the artist's work that would open to the public in a couple of days. Tracy proposed that Matt and his sister sit with Charles Shepard and her during dinner. Matt was duly impressed with Tracy's extensive knowledge of early 20th century art, and all the couples around them listened intently to her account of how she negotiated the return of the Egon Schiele piece looted by the Nazis prior to the start of World War II. After the event, Matt invited everyone at the table to late night drinks at One If By Land, Two If By Sea, the romantic and historic Greenwich Village landmark. Just before the evening wrapped, Matt asked Tracy if she would like to come out to San Diego to tour the new NanoNano facilities.

On their first real romantic date Matt took Tracy for a spectacular tour around Catalina Island on board *The Brobdignagian*, his 115 foot Astondoa yacht – an ironic name to be bestowed by someone who trafficked in the smallest of inventions. Matt's crew docked the yacht in Avalon Harbor where the couple hung around awhile on the aft deck as day-trippers ogled and took photos. Matt and Tracy eventually disembarked *The Brobdignagian* and strolled around the village. Matt insisted on showing his date the famous Catalina Casino. An enthusiastic

film buff, he noted that some scenes from Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* were shot on the island, including one that featured the twelve-story circular Casino. Later, the crew set sail for San Diego Bay about an hour before sunset because Matt wanted to treat Tracy to a view from the ocean of the Hotel Del Coronado. The signature red shingles of "the Del" blazed in the fiery orange rays of the setting sun. Matt and Tracy stood midship by the rail, enjoying a 1997 Screaming Eagle cabernet; he would have served the 1992, but it *was* the first date after all. A chilly breeze blew in and Matt casually draped his sport jacket around Tracy's bare shoulders. Tracy remarked, "I never realized how stunning the hotel really is. My father is a big Billy Wilder fan. Whenever I see the Del I think about sitting next to him on the sofa watching *Some Like it Hot*." Matt replied, "That's a great movie, but I think *The Stuntman* is better, don't you?"

The next day, before Tracy headed back to the East Coast on an early afternoon flight, the couple got in a quick nine at Torrey Pines Golf Course in La Jolla where Matt had recently become a member. The view from the cliffs pitched 300 feet above the Pacific genuinely inspired Tracy. Although she hadn't played golf in many years and considered the game somewhat of a bourgeois diversion for doughy, middle-aged white boys, Tracy still managed to par two holes and break 50 – even as she played alongside Matt from the men's tees.

On their second date, Tracy treated Matt to a cinema lover's tour of Manhattan, visiting locations of some of his favorite movies: the United Nations where Cary Grant is framed for murder in *North by Northwest*, the Edison Hotel where Luca Brasi is strangled at the bar in *The Godfather*, 308 Spring Street, site of the dismal Terminal Bar in *After Hours*, and a classic brownstone

on East 71st Street where society-girl Holly Golightly entertained her mod guests in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. The couple ate dinner at 21 where scenes were shot for *The Sweet Smell of Success* and *Wall Street*, and afterwards they paid a visit to Tracy's father, who upon learning of Matt's interest in American cinema, bent his ear for two hours talking excitedly and authoritatively about Billy Wilder, William Holden, Lemmon and Matthau, Norma Desmond, Chuck Tatum, and on and on. In the middle of the conversation, Tracy's father stood up and felt his way to the bookcase located behind the sofa. He called to his daughter, "Tracy Rae, come here and help me find a book. It's called *Nobody's Perfect*. It should be on the middle shelf with the other film books. Matt, keep it as long as you want."

Tracy and Matt wrapped up the evening over cocktails at the Blue Bar in the Algonquin Hotel, returning to Tracy's home in Sutton Place well past 2 a.m. In the midst of passionate love-making, to Matt's astonishment, Tracy demonstrated her skill and agility in the art of the footjob. Indeed, since performing the act on Fletcher Cuttbate, Tracy had practiced regularly by peeling bananas and unscrewing jars with her feet.

Matt made a quick run the next day to Harry Winston's on Fifth Avenue for a six-carat emerald cut diamond ring, and proposed marriage on the 86th floor of the Empire State Building in a corny homage to *An Affair to Remember*. On the way to meet Matt on the observation deck, Tracy's limo blew a flat. But in an age of cell-phones and text messaging, her tardiness did not result in years of solitude and recrimination.

Tracy was back on the West Coast for the first annual celebration of NanoNano's initial public offering – and what a

year it had been for the company. Revenues and profits were up significantly, and the speculators inhabiting the NASDAQ equities market rewarded shareholders handsomely. Tracy's \$250,000 investment was now worth \$2 million. The capital gain certainly helped take the financial sting out of being conned by Fletcher Cuttbate.

NanoNano beat its arch-rival PicoTech to market with a variety of products for the cosmetics industry, including an additive licensed by Clinique for a facial scrub, and a synthetic fiber to reinforce Ronco's aerosol spray-on hair filler for balding men. Seeking to make a social contribution of greater import than helping vain adults appear younger, Matt directed his R&D team to spend half its budget on developing nanocerias – tiny, inorganic structures with antioxidant properties designed to repair and protect sensitive retinal cells. The primary focus of the nanoceria R&D: curing retinitis pigmentosa.

PicoTech, on the other hand, suffered one misstep after another: a run-in with the FDA, a swatdown from the US Patent and Trademark Office over an infringement claim lodged by another nanotechnology firm, a downgrade rating from Goldman Sachs. And in a bizarre turn of events, an anonymous tipster contacted the SEC about insider trading activity involving Ron Subytic, PicoTech's recently-recruited Business Development Director. The SEC found insufficient proof of insider trading, but in the course of their investigation discovered some problematic evidence implicating Ron in a couple of financial scams pulled off over the previous year. Ron's indictment was the talk of the table.

"What was Ron thinking?" ... "It's a good thing he left NanoNano when he did." ... "I wonder who turned him in."

Tracy pretended to be shocked, but inside she chuckled mordantly. Right before ill-fortune befell poor Ron, Grayson Richards, Tracy's glacially-paced private investigator called to identify him as a potential co-conspirator with Fischer Cuttbate. Tracy already suspected he was a common thread in the scams perpetrated on Marilyn and herself; indeed, it was Tracy who recommended Richards intensify his examination of the man. But until Richards called with his confidential investigative report, she didn't know that at the time of the mediation sessions between NanoNano and PicoTech, Ron Subytic was engaged to a mid-level executive at Delta Airlines who had access to flight manifests, including DL 701. Tracy never revealed to Richards or anyone else that Ron's acromegaly was the scourge for which a "miracle" cure had been pioneered by another scam artist posing as the misunderstood identical twin of a pragmatic pharmaceutical entrepreneur. But acknowledging Richards's assertion that nothing is ever a coincidence – "not in my business" is what he said during that initial consultation – and emboldened by her convincing 911 acting debut, Tracy decided to return to the stage in the role of anonymous tipster, and drop a dime on big Ron.

The case of Connor Chertoff (aka Fletcher and Fischer Cuttbate, Calvin and Collier Blough, and a number of other aliases) was eventually closed by the New Jersey State Police; his death was chalked up to an act of self-defense by an unidentified young female prostitute. After the police finally settled on the true identity of the mystery corpse, they connected Chertoff to a failed con game in the 1980s targeting a producer of pornographic movies. The scheme was hatched around the time

it was discovered that pornstar Tracy Lords had performed in dozens of adult films while she was underage. The revelation reeled the industry and rendered it vulnerable to similar claims by other young actresses. To lend credibility, Chertoff recruited his 14-year-old niece to set up the movie producer, and when the scam failed, Chertoff served a three month sentence in Passaic County jail for his involvement in it. In exchange for Chertoff's guilty plea the DA dropped child endangerment charges.

A week after Tracy shot Fletch, an actual runaway teenage hooker in Camden, hoping to claim a reward, turned in a wallet she found mashed in the gutter beneath a layer of oily leaves. The presence of Chertoff's wallet in a shady section of town insinuated that he had a propensity to intertwine with the seamy side of society. The police boldly advanced their theory that Connor Chertoff was killed in self-defense by a frightened prostitute that he had lured, abducted, and threatened with rape and bodily harm. The recorded 911 call had been played and replayed on the radio and TV, and the story told therein was now broadly-accepted by the locals. One TV station went so far as to interview a voice-analysis expert who verified oh-so-authoritatively that the caller was indeed a young girl under genuine stress, and not a prankster. The press and concerned citizenry lined up uniformly in support of the police's theory.

But in case the theory turned out to be wrong, and there never was a teenage victim, the police had quietly posited the next likeliest scenario: that Chertoff was killed by a justifiably pissed-off target of one of his scams. Either way, the overriding attitude of most people was that Connor Chertoff got what he deserved. Maybe someday his killer would surface, but until that day, the lead detective on the case was satisfied with the final

disposition of the case.

Tracy was thankful that to date the authorities had kept sealed the fact that the late Chertoff's balls were tattooed with a pair of dice. If that information somehow got back to Grayson Richards – the PI she kept on retainer for appearances, and who billed her monthly for running down rat holes – he might posit an unwanted association between her and the dead man.

Halfway through dinner, Matt called for the attention of his employees and their guests, and asked Marilyn Jenkins, who was sitting next to him at the head table, to stand up. Matt rose from his chair as well and announced to the entire room that Marilyn had been promoted to Senior Vice President responsible for Human Resources, Media and Community Relations, and the Corporate Legal Department. Matt declared, "As you all know and appreciate, Marilyn brings enormous experience to the role and we're happy to have such a talented woman on the senior executive team."

Tracy had made sure to burn the words "talented woman" into Matt's brain. On NanoNano's website the next morning news of Marilyn's promotion was prominently displayed and written breathlessly, as though she had just won the Nobel Prize for Personnel – even though her true responsibilities barely changed. She still owned Human Relations, of course, but the so-called Corporate Legal Department consisted of a single paralegal who interfaced with a private law firm, and the Media and Community Relations department was a brand-new concoction dreamed up by Matt with help from Tracy – an unstaffed figment of Matt's imagination that Marilyn would toil to develop into something real, assuming she could extract a budget from the

stingy CFO. Nonetheless, Marilyn was ecstatic to get the SVP title and associated attention, not to mention the 25 percent salary boost and the grant of 10,000 restricted stock units.

Near the end of NanoNano's first annual celebration – after \$45,000 worth of food and booze had been consumed, and during the final set of the eight-piece American standards band – Tracy excused herself and visited the ladies' room. She was perfectly, optimally drunk: her skin glowed, she was light-headed, and her libido was a bit randy ... but for the most part she remained in control of her faculties. Tracy splashed cool water on her face and in a flash of *déjà vu*, spotted the image of Marilyn Jenkins in the mirror standing uncomfortably behind her. She too appeared tipsy.

Tracy turned around as she dried her hands with a linen cloth. "Congrashulations, Marilyn. Well done. Senior VP. I wish you the best of luck."

To Tracy's surprise, Marilyn lashed out, "I earned this promotion, Tracy. Do you understand? Earned it. I don't want you telling people I asked you for help ... I mean negotiated for help ... Shit!" After a beat, she continued, "Goddammit, Tracy, I got this fucking promotion through hard work and dedication! I gave up a lot to come work for this start-up. It was touch and go for awhile, but now things are finally paying off for me."

As though she were speaking to a lunatic strapped with explosives, Tracy responded, "Of course you earned it. Why would you even bring it up?" She tried to remain calm, rubbing her hands repeatedly with the towel in a subliminal signal for Marilyn to remain calm as well.

"Now that you're screwing my boss, I don't want anyone thinking you had something to do with it. Like payback for

saving your ass on that Calvin thing ...”

Tracy cut her off abruptly. Fuck the explosives. “Jesus Christ, Marilyn! What the fuck is wrong with you? Did you drink too many Dirty Shirleys again?” Tracy bent down low to inspect the stalls for the telltale feet of accidental interlopers. Finding none, she added with exasperation, “Look, you’re a Senior VP now. Don’t blow it, Marilyn. Keep your fucking mouth shut – forever. Do you understand me? Forever. If you do that, you’ll go far in my company.”

Marilyn was taken aback. “Huh? Your ... what? *Your* company?”

Tracy tossed the linen cloth into a stylish woven basket and headed for the door. Before she stepped out of the restroom and back into the action, before she danced to “Night and Day” with Matt Blankenshein, CEO and future husband, Tracy turned to Marilyn and said with a smile, “You don’t get what you deserve in this world, Marilyn. You get what you negotiate.”

OTHER BOOKS BY HERB SCHULTZ

RonnieandLennie

RonnieandLennie

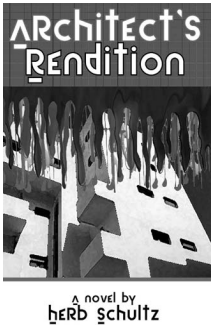


HERB SCHULTZ

Ronnie and Lennie are identical twins fused in the womb who join a world that is unprepared to separate them. The reason for their plight is vague and debatable, but one possibility wends its way throughout the narrative. Seemingly chained for life in a rural backwater of North Carolina, Ronnie and Lennie unexpectedly break free, but life apart is not all it's cracked up to be. Serious shit descends upon our heroes, and they find themselves prisoners of another kind. A case of chronic adjustment disorder compels the twins to drastic action.

Throughout the story we are introduced to a broad array of characters that influence the direction and speed Ronnie and Lennie take through life – a rudderless mother, a crazy groupie, an evil gambler, an unconventional doctor, to name just a few. *RonnieandLennie* is a funny, sad, vulgar story that spans decades and visits numerous venues as it chronicles the lives of two conjoined at the chest by a rogue band of flesh.

Architect's Rendition



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.

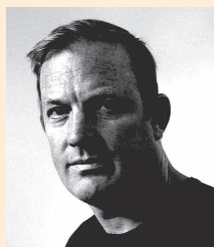
Gerald has come to resent a lot of things over the course of twenty long years of marriage to Morcilla. He meets Wren, a beautiful, vivacious goddess half his age. Her jaw is perfect. He resolves to be with her. After obstacles to his happiness begin to pile up, Gerald tries his hand at architecting 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 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.

Tracy Shepard is in the business of alternative dispute resolution – a fancy name for mediation. She is an expert in the art of negotiation, highly compensated by parties from all over the world – Fortune 500 companies, celebrities, wealthy families – locked in disagreement, burning cash on futile litigation, seeking another way out. Dubbed the “Medea of Mediation” for her drive and ambition, Tracy offers to help the owners of a small pharmaceutical lab resolve a difference between them that is holding up progress on a breakthrough drug. She is compelled to help the owners of the lab – identical twins named Fischer and Fletcher Cuttbate – because their drug is meant to cure an insidious eye disease that afflicts tens of thousands of people, including her father.

Shortly after meeting them, Tracy becomes attracted to each Cuttbate brother for different reasons: Fischer for his gallantry and business acumen, Fletcher for his artistry and vulnerability. However, in the course of her mediation efforts she discovers disturbing evidence of fraud, and soon she finds that nothing is as it seems.

Double Blind Test is a story of deceit, connivance, despair and lex talionis which addresses the centuries-old question: What are the chances that two different men have the same tattoo ... on their balls?



Author, Herb Schultz

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 New York and is the author of the novels *Ronnie and Lennie* and *Architect's Rendition*.

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