

CORPORATE SEX

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The modern liberal societies are extremely effective at raising children to be the sorts of people who could not possibly be happy in any Heaven conceivable under Christian beliefs.

A recursively consistent author,
*To See a World in a Grain of
Sand*

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Reproducing What's Important

Once a wasteland of forests and lakes with a thin scattering of Amerinds, Manhattan had become a wonderland of steel and glass structures, housing a multitude of activities. Much of the wealth of a powerful nation was controlled by doers housed in those structures. Much of the best food, the best music, and products most elegant and most expensive were produced or sold in those structures. Many of the world's most celebrated celebrities chose to spend many weeks of the year on Manhattan, owning condos furnished at a greater cost than it would take to feed some African villages for several centuries. Many who greatly admired those celebrities for being celebrated owned condos of equal splendor; many more who greatly admired those celebrities owned far more modest condos or rented apartments with less floor space than a small cabin in the Catskills.

Not all the ground of Manhattan was being used for such wondrous purposes, but much of the land left vacant by the builders was usefully paved with concrete and asphalt. There was a scattering of plazas with grass and trees and – of course – Central Park to disrupt the movement of cars and taxies, buses and trucks, though occasionally was that great expanse of grass and trees and water useful for concerts or art-exhibits.

But mostly there was enough rationally developed space that enough movement was possible. Yes, upon those concrete and asphalt roadways and walkways moved creatures of steel and plastic, creatures of polyester and flesh. Moved those movers, those which moved selves, those which were moved by substances which were replaced regularly only to be combusted.

Moved the movers and moved they other creatures as well. Moved they also objects too simple to be labeled as creatures in ordinary discourse.

Moved they, moved they others. Movement. Movement.

Pretty creatures some, moving well-formed and well-exercised thighs, one thigh after the other but that was necessary. Intelligently designed they were to move the one, then the other, and not to move both at once, though that simultaneous mode of movement seemed effective for kangaroos. And they were as active as kangaroos fleeing human gunmen. Fear it was not that moved these movers, but rather were they motivated by the thought of all those stores to visit, restaurants to be seen in, offices to occupy. Some were even ambitious, figuring that they had a chance to join those celebrated for their celebrity if only they managed to be seen often enough and in a proper way.

Ah, those pretty ones, those objects of desire in a society which understood the importance of desiring what was important.

Twelve a secretary and 20 a little princess of a rich daddy and 15 a lawyer. Which were which? Difficult it was to tell and impossible in many cases.

Well-tanned the thighs, confident the struts. . .

But were there no men also strutting along those. . .

Let's forget the fellow in the ankle-length wool-coat over which he's wearing two ski parkas. . .

New York City sometimes is coolish in August.

Not so to the other men strutting by, some in shorts but most in slacks, with or without sports-coats or even nice suits. Few the beards. Not many the pony-tails, though not unseen. Some might be strutting as to draw the attention of potential partners in some sort of merger.

Businessmen in this modern age are always ready to sell assets if the offered price is worth more than the discounted stream of income they would expect to get from that asset. Can that be the proper explanation?

But who be the potential merger or acquisition partners? Mostly the men are watching the women, seeming to prefer the younger ones with smooth skin and full lips and big eyes and perky breasts. Mostly the women are watching the other women as if they were in competition for attention. Is it the women who draw most offers of merger while the men. . .

Is it the men who tend to make the offers?

To what purpose? The men might have as much of the assets valued by the average New York City resident: a high income and a vacation home out on the Island along with a time-share at a Vermont ski-lodge. A 30 year-old blonde might have great assets, but so might that 28 year-old man who just marched past her in his navy-blue Brooks Brothers suit of a cut

just a little conservative for such a young man. Suppose she does have a degree in international business law from the London School of Economics. Doesn't he have a doctorate in physics that prepared him so well to write mathematical models of potential movements in the oil-futures market?

But is there a little bit less energy in the air and in the movements of all these young people desiring what they know to be important? Is it the gap in the sky-line to the south? Is it the number of people walking around with passports decorated with visas for trips to Shanghai?

Surely not. This great city of New York seems so wealthy. So much cash is flowing through and perhaps more will flow through as the American economy continues to rationalize, to outsource the work to the most efficient and lowest-cost workers.

Surely all this energy, all this movement, by so many attractive young people will result in the reproduction of what has been given to them, for personal ownership and and for stewardship. Surely, all these attractive young people feel the responsibility to guard and reproduce that which is most important.

Ah yes, you can see from the expressions on their faces that they feel the responsibility and that they will reproduce what they can see to be most important, what is most needed in upcoming eras.

Part I
Objects of Desire

1 An Unexpected Encounter

Mary Pride was standing at the entrance of her cubicle when she caught movement out of the corner of her right eye. Looking up, she saw Jake Preskile striding towards her. He quickly drew close to her, a grim and determined expression upon that face which had always struck Mary as being so lean and hungry. His hand started to go up in a wave but he quickly dropped it in response to . . . a laugh. Mary realized she had laughed, not in a malicious manner, but in the way she'd often laughed at her father when he had stiffly crumbled to her side to work on a jigsaw puzzle or a picture to be colored.

Jake came up to within a couple of feet of her and smiled as smoothly as Mary would have expected, though she really didn't know him well at all. She'd probably only exchanged a few sentences with him in the entire three years she'd been working at CMBG in New York. And she'd never had a desire for more communication, of any sort, with him. He was a symbol of much that left her weary and discouraged her with her present life. He was a man who seemed at home and even quite happy in the corporate environment.

And then Mary told herself she barely knew Jake and it might well be unfair to consider him to be a well-adapted corporate animal. . .

"Mary," and she heard him speak in a pleasant voice, leaving her feeling still more suspicious. Why was he here? Why would an ambitious creature of the financial world waste his time in the Personnel Department? He looked at her strangely and she wondered if her mask was down, if she were showing her distrust and dislike, and she told herself it wasn't fair to make this flesh-and-blood man into a symbol of all that she disliked about her life and about her environment. The puzzlement was still showing in the wrinkles of concentration about his eyes, but Jake went on to say, "Mr Thornsby and I were talking about the tight schedule we'll be on with," and

he looked about before adding, “the acquisition we’ll be talking about in the meeting upstairs. When I showed him the schedule I’d put together, he told me it puts a burden on you. So I came down here to talk to you quickly before the meeting.” He looked at his watch and then back at her, his face showing once more nothing but calm ambition and confident intensity. There was a hard tint to the baby-blue of his eyes, there was a hardness about the very placement of his prominently hooked nose. His chin was firm in a manner that Mary found displeasing, that is, in conjunction with the entire package.

She motioned down the hallway a short ways. “We can talk in the conference room, behind closed doors. I was leaving to run a couple of personal errands before heading up to the meeting.”

A smile appeared upon Jake’s face, a smile that veered close to being attractively pleasant, a smile that distracted Mary for just a heart-beat before she took a step towards the conference room. Jake didn’t move, and he grinned before she was able to maneuver around him. “Didn’t anyone tell you that the personal life is dead in this brave, new corporate world?”

Mary gave no more than a cursory smile. She stepped to her right and walked past Jake, entering the conference room and taking the strap of her dark-blue nylon briefcase from her shoulder. As she was placing her burden upon the table, she checked out of the corner of her eyes, making sure Jake was at her side before saying, as if to no one in particular, “I’ve always found our generation has the singularly unattractive habit of parodying what is reprehensible about our behavior and our ways of thought.” Immediately she wondered when she had become some sort of Puritan, but the line of thought disappeared as soon as she looked at Jake and saw not anger but interest in . . .

And she remembered that the thought she’d just expressed had not been her own but had rather come from a critical review of the advertisements for one of the television channels which brought back old programs from Mary’s childhood and well before that as well. A shudder passed up her spine, though she was sure she showed nothing on the surface, but then another shudder passed up her spine as she met Jake’s gaze eyeball to eyeball. He’d shown no more than a desire to be pleasant before Mary had made a comment which she had intended to puncture rather than make her suddenly attractive to this corporate reptile. Now she feared she’d awakened a different interest on his part, but she smiled in a manner meant to be neutral and no more than polite. Turning more fully towards Jake

who'd retreated a step to sit down, she told him, "Now we can mention the name of Baxton, Inc. I don't think this room is bugged by any investment bankers wishing to stir up interest in competing bids."

"I was just being careful. I probably have some bad habits, some loose ways of speaking. In the Financial Department, even our secretaries are screened for their willingness to keep their mouths closed. Else we'd be operating in an atmosphere of paranoia. Memos are always flying about which might be useful to..." He paused before saying with precise enunciation, "Investment bankers wishing to stir up interest in competing bids."

Feeling afraid that Jake had been not been speaking sarcastically but rather teasingly, Mary said, "Okay. Am I to give up even a hint of a private life for the next few months?"

Jake shook his head, still staring at Mary as if studying her, and she grew still more afraid that his teasing might have a more serious intent, but he only stared at her in that way for a second or two before shaking his head. "No, for the next few months, I might be giving up my few hints of a private life, though Baxton is only part of that. If the Baxton board tentatively accepts our offer, then you'll be doing a stretch of long days, maybe on-site in Nashua, for a week or two. Mr Thornsby is worried about something, I think the possibility of having to lay off a lot of workers at Baxton. I don't share his worries. Good workers will find jobs, even if they have to move."

Mary glared at Jake for just a second before she picked up her brief-case and put the strap over her shoulder. "I'll clear my schedule for the next couple of weeks. I'll carry out my analyses of the Baxton employment levels, pay levels, and benefit levels and have the results to you and Mr Thornsby as soon as humanly possible." After walking past Jake, she paused at the door and turned to add, "If the acquisition goes through, that is." And she headed off to pick up her laundry, half-inclined to head on for a walk in Central Park rather than returning for the meeting which would take place in...

She looked at her watch and saw that it was already 10:17, only 28 minutes to go before the meeting scheduled at the odd time of 10:45, "Undoubtedly," she told herself, "because of the tight schedule of the important people up in the Financial Department."

2 Intrusions of Moral Thought

After dropping off her clean shirts in her cubicle, Mary headed right up to the executive wing, only three minutes to go before the meeting started. She'd always been in the habit of getting to meetings a few minutes early so that she could organize herself, finding it much easier to concentrate on presentations and discussions if she didn't have to so much as look down to search for her writing pad or her pencil. The timing would have been just right if Jake had not interrupted her on her way out to pick up her dry-cleaning.

So it was that she walked up to the receptionist's desk, hearing herself give out a curt, "Good morning," to Debbie, a pleasant young lady from Long Island; Mary had hired her and then had to coach her through a period of dressing down from the more exotic teenage styles as well as having to get her to tone down her heavy use of make-up. Without another word, Mary scribbled her name on the log and moved on to the conference room, not at all surprised to see she was nearly the last to arrive.

Mr Thornsby, the Executive Vice-president and Chief Financial Officer for CMBG sat at the head of the table, with Jake Preskile at his right hand and his executive assistant at his left hand. Doris Gillespie was a forties woman who'd recently completed her MBA while working full-time as the office-administrator in a large CMBG plant near Austin. Finding Doris' in-house application for an opening in the financial department had been one of the more pleasant moments in Mary's four year-old career as a corporate personnel manager. Doris had not gotten the job she'd applied for, but Mary had kept her in mind and had suggested her to Mr Thornsby a month later when he went in search of a new executive assistant. The two women exchanged smiles and Mary remembered that Doris had been reluctant to accept what seemed to be a menial position until she'd been told that the two previous occupants of the position had moved on to become supervisors

of small but important units in the Financial Department. She'd told Doris, "It's a launching pad rather than a long-term job."

"Good morning, Mary." She stopped walking and looked back to see Mr Thornsby smile pleasantly at her before he dropped his eyes back to some sort of memo or report that he was reading. Though she'd been trying not to look at Jake, she couldn't help noticing he was looking at her, some puzzlement still showing on his face. That wouldn't have been bad except that she thought she detected some personal interest in that expression.

And she took a seat, next to Doris. On the other side of Mary was Maria Cortez, a recent hire that Mary had helped to recruit out of the business school at the University of Miami. Maria smiled and said, "Buenos dias, Mary." And then she winked at Mary. They had a private joke going because of Mary's clowning around with her high school Spanish during the second interview, after the two women were comfortable with each other. And Jake seemed to be still expending part of his attention upon studying her. Leaning towards Maria, Mary asked, "How's your father doing?"

Maria whispered back, "He's going to a rehab hospital for a month or so and then he'll be home. And probably back at his bank shortly after that. The stroke damaged his walking a little, but didn't touch his memory or his speech. He told me, with great determination, that he still expects to dance on Castro's grave."

Mary smiled and turned around just in time to hear Jake clear his throat, undoubtedly on behalf of Mr Thornsby. But the CFO just nodded at the young superstar of the world of high-finance and Jake was off and running:

Well, folks, this isn't the largest acquisition we've worked on recently, but it is one of the more important because we're starting to move our forces into position. Baxton will undergo a severe cultural shock as it stops distributing industrial supplies from a large number of manufacturers and importers and begins to specialize in products from CMBG subsidiaries and allies. But such transitions are pretty common in a modern economy. And we'll be there to help them manage the transition.

Jake continued to talk as Mary's attention drifted to the windows, not that there was much to see out the tinted windows of the seventeenth floor. The October sky was transformed to a rather eerie brownish-gray but it looked as if it were free of clouds. She could see the Statue of Liberty,

a frightening sight since it had once been blocked from view by the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Her thoughts began to drift back to the days when she'd worked behind the counter of her father's hardware store. . .

And she returned her attention to the conference room while Jake was still talking about the schedule, of little concern to her other than the part he'd already warned her about. She glanced quickly at her notes and saw one topic on her agenda which she would have to bring up if Jake didn't mention it. She listened as Jake brought his short discussion of the schedule to a close and asked, "Are there any questions, folks?"

No one made a motion, but the break allowed Mary to look around and to see that the white-board behind Jake had a list of topics to be addressed. Next on the list was funding. And Jake looked to Mr Thornsby who spoke quietly, "I'm sure that everyone knows that our sister corporation, JREI, is bleeding heavily with the real-estate market so depressed in New York City. The Board of our parent corporation, GRF, has laid down the rule that outlays of cash are to be minimized, unless the cash can be generated from Baxton's own assets. Since I am a member of that Board, I was part of the discussions and I know that we have good reason to minimize any outflows of cash. If we didn't need Baxton to complete the puzzle we've been assembling over the past few years, we wouldn't even be trying to acquire that company right now. We *can't* afford to lose out on Baxton." Without saying why it was so urgent, Mr Thornsby looked back over to Jake and nodded.

Mary's attention shifted over to Jake and saw that he was looking at his notes before going on. She raised her pencil, but he wasn't looking at her, and neither was Mr Thornsby. Since the meeting was informal, she spoke even without being recognized: "Will there be significant layoffs? Specifically, should I be planning for severance pay or the hiring of an outplacement specialist?"

Jake shrugged and wrinkled his face in a way that Mary interrupted as a dismissal of the issue. She heard no sound but thought he sighed before returning to his business-like expression and manner. "There are probably surplus workers at Baxton. If we are successful in purchasing the company. . . Yes, Mary, some of those workers will lose their jobs, but good workers can always find a job, even if they have to move to another state."

He had not even finished speaking before Mary Pride felt her stomach muscles tighten. And then she the muscles of her legs and back tighten as if

she were going to try to leap that three foot wide expanse of polished oak. She felt ready to wipe that smug expression off of his face. And a smirk came over Jake's face as if to dare her to do it, as if he had deliberately antagonized her, had goaded her into a moral response or. . .

A retreat. And she didn't wish to retreat, but she felt herself withdrawing as she remembered that Jake had mentioned to her in private that he thought Mr Thornsby might be afraid of lay-offs up at Baxton if the acquisition was successful. She wondered if Jake thought she had deliberately betrayed him, had used his own comment to put a knife in his back in front of his boss and some of his colleagues and subordinates.

Mary felt ashamed but only for a second before she felt her muscles tightening once again. She'd not really done anything wrong and Jake was acting as if he had something to hide. Maybe he had mentioned the subject of layoffs to her because he knew that there would likely be large-scale lay-offs at a time when unemployment was inching up in northern New England. She felt a desire to advance again, right up to—and beyond—the line that she felt Jake had drawn in the sand. She felt her hands gripping the table again, as if she were once more preparing to leap at Jake and slap that smug expression. . .

But she noticed his face was showing more confusion than smugness. She felt herself coming to a boil inside and began to imagine all the people who'd have to go short on Christmas presents for their children, all the people who'd lose their medical benefits—for themselves and their dependents. Her insides were going at a full boil and she realized she must be showing it. The others in the meeting, mostly young staffers from the financial department, were frozen still. At least the ones she could see. Mr Thornsby was out of her line of sight.

Was CMBG's CFO surprised at the sudden eruption of hostile feelings when nothing more than an acquisition was being discussed? Was he wondering about Mary's ability to hold herself under control when she'd been irritated by no more than words. She hoped not; he wasn't in her direct line of report but he far out-ranked her boss, Mr Simpson, the Senior Vice-President of Personnel. She wasn't sure if Mr Thornsby was annoyed or, worse—amused, by the anger she knew to be showing on her face. She couldn't see him at the end of the table without turning her head and she wasn't about to do that. Jake had stopped looking confused and was now staring back at Mary as if he were irritated. She didn't quite blame him. He was a corporate animal and she had threatened his control of a kill because

of her concern for the young ones of that animal he was attacking. And then Mary felt confused. She knew the image she'd used in her mind was far from being a good match to the situation with Baxton and Jake, but she was still sure that innocent people were going to be hurt and suspicious that Jake was cold-blooded about those in harm's way.

And she was starting to feel a little childish when Mr Thornsby's soft voice spoke out: "Jake, please review the projected earnings and cash-flows for Baxton." That command proved sufficient to cause Jake to settle back and break his gaze away from Mary. He reached for a folder in the short pile lying in front of him, but he'd not had a chance to open it before Mr Thornsby spoke once more, softly but firmly, "We'll send Mary to their headquarters in Nashua after the Baxton board accepts our offer. Then, she can get a handle on the programs needed to help the Baxton workforce make the transition."

Thus it was that Mary Pride, distracted by her own silent planning process, barely heard Jake Preskile present several different schemes for buying Baxton with that company's own cash-flow and excess assets, some of which excess assets were buried in overly-generous pension plans or medical benefits. More than that, he was claiming there would be enough money to automate the inventory and delivery systems of that industrial supplier. The first goal for CMBG, Inc, in Jake's presentation, was to avoid putting any money into the purchase of Baxton; the second goal was to minimize the size of that middle-man corporation without at all affecting its gross cash flows or its profits. Properties were to be sold and leased back. Pension plans and health insurance plans were to be reduced to be more in line with current market realities. Though Jake didn't mention it in his presentation, Mary knew that his proposed schemes were variations of the same sorts of financial tricks used by the CMBG executives and a few large stock-holders when they'd bought the company by way of an empty shell of a corporation named GRF, Inc.

"And, so," Jake concluded as Mary Pride began to scribble out plans for her Baxton intelligence gathering activities, "we should aim at delivery directly from the manufacturer to the customer whenever possible, making sure, of course, that a Baxton sales rep is present to remind the customer who got him a good deal and who will be able to maintain good service."

A jolt that was to Mary Pride when she remembered the high percentage of her father's assets that had been tied up in inventory in the family hardware store. Radiator valves didn't exactly jump off the shelves, but

they had to be kept against the emergency needs of a valuable customer or long-time friend or neighbor. It was no big deal for a giant discount hardware store to satisfy emergency demand by holding a few slow-moving items—after all, they formed a small percentage of the worth of those items filling miles of shelves in the stores and warehouses. A nationwide chain could hold back-up stock for slow-moving items in their regional warehouses and thus minimize the risks of too many emergencies running through their stock. Those sorts of draw-downs of stock would not happen everywhere at the same time. She had thought often and with great intensity about her father’s problems with his small hardware store. She had come to understand at the gut-level the advantages of a large corporation. A nationwide chain could put up ten large stores to replace 100 small, family-owned businesses and could hold far less total stock in the process, though they could manage to offer far more variety of stock in each of those stores than any old-fashioned, family-owned store could have done.

Family store. . .

So had she thought of it, having readily and happily become accustomed to the idea that she would one day run it. When she’d been younger, her mother had spoken of a desire to have a son who would work with his father and take over the store, but Mary’s father had never acted as if Mary would be displaced from her position in the store, helping to stock shelves and sweep floors from the time she could walk about. And the son had never come. The son had never. . .

Hearing some rustling of papers, Mary returned from her memories to see that people were rising and heading for the door. She looked down to see that she had written a couple of notes to herself to check employee availability in the region of Baxton, to check average benefit levels in that region, to. . .

The next line had a dash to mark off a new item, but she had written only the word ‘emporium’, though she’d written that word four times. And she felt a smile come to her lips as she thought of her grandfather, her mother’s father, who had founded the hardware store and eventually turned it over to his son-in-law. Her grandfather had always told her any self-respecting businessman would own an emporium rather than a mere store.

“Well, Mary, I guess you’re a little upset with our apparent lack of concern for the Baxton employees.” The voice was gentle and calm and Mary looked up, suppressing her urge to smile at Mr Thornsby, who pulled out a recently vacated chair. He was smiling in a way that reminded her

of her grandfather and she had to once more suppress an desire to smile back at him. Yet, he nodded in a friendly manner. She noticed he had prepared to reach out, probably to pat her hand which was resting on the table, but he had suppressed that motion. "I know it's hard sometimes when we do things that seem to be hurting people, Mary. And it's your job to protect people. It's the job of all the people in the Personnel department but especially those of you who are part of CMBG's management." His smile eased off a little before he went on to tell her, "But people who are holding superfluous jobs are being hurt more than helped. For their own good, they need to move on. Sure, if there was a way they could hold those needless jobs for the rest of their lives, they'd have no reason to complain. And a certain percentage of people, at all levels and in all parts of the country, do get away with holding unnecessary jobs and, often enough, they are also greatly overpaid. That doesn't happen often. At least not in our type of economy and our type of political system. The market is allowed to operate and it tends to drive overly-generous companies out of business. Or..." Mr Thornsby's gray eyes looked almost sad, the upwards movement of his hands seemed to Mary to be a bit much, and he told her, "Often a company will be driven into the arms of a suitor which will make it's investment good partly by rationalizing pay-levels and benefit programs and by letting surplus workers go. The system can be cruel at times, but it's certainly far less cruel than any others which have been tried. All other economic systems I'm aware of have left people mired in poverty. And good intentions don't feed children and don't provide medical care for the elderly."

Mary still felt troubled and confused. Perhaps she showed it; Mr Thornsby smiled at her again. It was then that she noticed Jake was lingering at the door to the conference room, but he noticed her noticing him. Throwing her a smile which she couldn't interpret, he then turned and left.

After casting a glance over his shoulder and catching Jake as he turned to leave, Mr Thornsby turned back to Mary and confessed, "I didn't really mean to give you an economics lecture. I'm sure you had enough of those in business school. I'm just assuring you that we are not going to treat the Baxton workers badly. Even if we have to let some go, we will do our best to place them elsewhere or to give them a severance check to keep them going until they find another job." He looked down at the floor between his knees before getting back to his confession, "There are some fine lines we often have to draw in the sand, Mary, and I'm not convinced I've always

stayed on the right side. I know that I've sometimes been dragged over to the wrong side, but I don't think that's the case with the Baxton takeover bid."

Mr Thornsby's shoulder twisted just enough to alarm Mary and she felt herself draw back. She trusted him, she liked him, but she didn't want him to so much as pat her on the hand while she was trying to straighten matters out in her own head. And he reached out but laid his hand gently upon the table, a good six inches short of hers.

"You've heard me talk about my oldest daughter, Cathy." Mary nodded needlessly and wondered if she were showing more confusion at the sudden switch in topics. "She married fairly late. In her early thirties. She married a good man, though her choice surprised me greatly. Karl is a Mennonite Bible scholar of all things. I've had some serious conflicts of opinion with him, but he's a good man and I think he has the same opinion of me, however much he sees me as being allied with the forces of a fallen world." Mr Thornsby drew his hand back and Mary felt tense. She wondered if she should make it obvious to Mr Thornsby that she wasn't about to feel sorry for him. He was pulling off another major business conquest; if his conscience bothered him a little...

But then she wondered what his daughter had to do with either business glory or the impending lay-offs at Baxton. She looked at him and saw he'd dropped his eyes, but then he lifted them and looked at her. "Well, Karl does his best to make me feel welcome and to spray some of his Christian love in my direction. And, as a good Methodist, I appreciate his feelings of charity, but..." He moved his shoulders again, as if about to signal some sort of helplessness he felt. He suppressed that and told Mary, "Little Paul and tiny Katie are being raised by a father whose radical views on non-violence have spilled over to a radical opposition to corporations and large governments and those children sometimes look at me as if..." He took a breath and was silent for a second before going on: "I know Karl would never, never turn them against me deliberately, but somehow..." And this time he went through with the shrug of helplessness before smiling sadly at Mary.

"And the worst of it is... Well, one of the worst parts of the entire mess is all the memories it stirs up in me. All the memories of my days of radical social and economic views when I was at Amherst College and fighting my father's plans to send me to Harvard Business School. I lost the fight and eventually decided that financial management isn't such a bad career and

it is one which can be led in a morally responsible manner.”

Mr Thornsby started to rise as if finished, but then he settled down in his chair again and told Mary, “If you have any questions or doubts about what we’re doing and any concerns about how we’ll be treating the workers at Baxton, feel free to come and see me. I expect to be an awfully busy man for the next few weeks, but I’ll squeeze you in somehow. Maybe it will give me practice for dealing with Karl’s moral criticisms of corporate business methods. And he’ll probably have some specific comments when it hits the newspapers after we go through with this buy-out.”

And this time he did rise and he turned quickly towards the door, avoiding any more eye-contact. As he was walking out the door, Mary suddenly felt guilty for suppressing those smiles.

3 A Friendly Proposition

Mary had reached the entrance to her cubicle and was about to get to work on a more detailed review of the benefit structure at Baxton when she once again caught movement out of the corner of her right eye. Looking up, she saw Jake Preskile once again striding towards her. He quickly drew close to her and smiled, in a manner almost shy, but quickly did a mask came over his features as if he were suddenly uncomfortable. . .

The hard tint to his blue eyes had nearly disappeared, and then she wasn't sure it had ever really been there. He rested his arm upon the wall to her cubicle, but she said nothing. That didn't seem to disturb him, a matter she found disconcerting after the quiet but difficult scene she'd caused in the meeting just fifteen minutes ago. It bothered her further that the busiest, most no-nonsense young executive in the entire GRF empire was standing in front of her, relaxed as if he had all the time in the world, and that time was being offered to Mary, a woman who'd said something, in front of his boss and co-workers, which he could have interpreted as betrayal of a sort.

After a short silence, he offered, "I didn't mean to upset you in there, Mary. I know I just dismissed your question in a cavalier manner but layoffs are a fact of life in modern business and they're one of the reasons for our prosperity. . ."

He reddened a little. "I'm sorry. I didn't really mean to start to lecture you on economic theory. What I meant to do was to apologize. You can't take these things personally. We often speak bluntly in the financial world. When a lot of money is on the line and decisions have to be made fast, we don't always have time to be polite or to take care of the niceties of human relationships." He shifted his eyes as if something had caught his attention, but Mary kept her gaze steady upon his face which seemed to be blushing just a small bit. She didn't say a word and he looked uncomfortable with

the silence, which suited her just fine. But she was starting to feel sorry for him just when he asked, “How ’bout letting me buy you dinner to show there’s no hard feelings?”

Not sure why that would show there were no hard feelings, Mary remained silent for a few seconds as she was working towards the conclusion that Jake didn’t think girls could play as rough as boys, but she realized she was trying too hard to read his thoughts and feelings. And she wasn’t even sure about her own thoughts and feelings! She decided to cut the scene short and spoke in a business-like manner, “*Pedro’s* at seven.” Having made sure there would be no meeting at either apartment, she entered her cubicle, noticing that a smile was starting to form on Jake’s face. Mary was afraid of her feelings of pleasure raised by that smile.

As she sat down at her desk, the piles of papers and personnel manuals relating to Baxton suddenly seemed to be more than a body could review in a lifetime. Or maybe it was more that. . .

Much of the material was likely to lead to decisions she wouldn’t want to be part of. And suddenly her mind shifted back to something that Mr Thornsby had said. He’d spoken of the immorality of keeping superfluous workers on the payroll, and she wondered why it was that so many executives would say such things and then go out and fight to add more workers to their personal empires.

Not sure where that thought would go, Mary tried to return to her work, telling herself she already had more than she could handle and it was quite possible Baxton could turn out to be an even bigger job than she was currently planning for. She looked back at the pile of papers and packages on her desk, wondering if she should requisition one of the outside offices with lockable doors. So far, she had only manuals and summarizations of the pay and benefit levels, but there would be a lot of personal and confidential information showing up if the buyout offer went to the next stage. She’d have information on the salaries of secretaries and vice-presidents, reports of harassment complaints and warnings of bad work habits. . .

She remembered once again that there were real salaries, paid to real human beings, behind all those summary reports with their crisp wordings and their professionally formatted charts. She already suspected that she would have to recommend a cut in pension and educational benefits, and possibly a drop in salary levels in some job classifications. Mary felt her stomach churn as it had not done since those terrible years when she’d watched her mother’s memory and cognitive functions decay.

Shaking off those hellish memories, Mary looked back at the piles of paper on her desk. Based on this preliminary information, she was pretty sure there were excessive benefits at Baxton relative to the current corporate standards. Certainly, Baxton benefits were generous compared to benefits at comparable companies already part of the CMBG family. She also had a suspicion there were too many employees being retained after bad reviews. The policies for time off for funerals and child-birth and vaguely defined family situations indicated too much sympathy for the personal problems of employees. On the whole, she had reasons to believe she would have to make a number of harsh recommendations. She would have no choice if that was what her analyses indicated. After all, as her grandfather had said to her many times, "Honesty is the last refuge of the modern scoundrel." But she. . .

She had no intention of becoming a modern scoundrel.

Then again, "What choice do I have?"

Unsure of how to get a grip on her moral dilemmas, she told herself that it was clear she was morally bound to do her job and to do it efficiently and well.

Wasn't she?

Not able to see past her duty to do the job she was paid to do, Mary Pride put her nose back to the grindstone and soon confirmed her fears that Baxton was being too generous to forklift operators and secretaries. They were paying better than the wages prevailing in that area, and it was hard to justify the education benefits for the non-professional workers. True enough, there had been that forklift operator who had worked through a BS and then an MBA and was now assistant controller. She found a statement that two secretaries had become computer programmers. One file-clerk had used the educational benefits to get an associates degree and she was now the facilities manager for the home-office and Baxton's main warehouse. That was nice for those individuals, but it simply wasn't necessary in the existing marketplace for Baxton to be so generous. Certified computer programmers and people with business degrees weren't that rare, and Baxton shouldn't have to pay too much even for someone with an MBA from an accredited business-school. Graduates of Harvard and Stanford could command good deals, but Baxton had little need for people with those sorts of credentials and graduates of lesser schools had to be willing to grab hold of the first-rung of a corporate ladder.

Someone like Jake had been able to jump right into a high-paying job

at CMBG, with his undergraduate degree in industrial engineering from MIT and his MBA in financial management from Stanford, but Jake, even right out of school, would have been over-qualified for any job at Baxton, except for Chief Executive Officer or Chief Financial Officer. She wasn't sure whether she should feel happy for Jake, or sorry for him. . .

And that line of thought seeming too frustrating to pursue. . .

Trying to get her mind back on track, she looked down at the pad where she'd been writing her to-do list and her open questions and found that her right hand had drifted away and was now doodling upon her desk calendar. *Pedro's* had been written out seven times, five of those with a question mark. What of the other two?

Mary threw down her pencil in disgust as she realized she hadn't been dating much lately. She really hadn't even been going out much with her female friends. Work was filling up her time and. . .

Nothing was really filling her emotional needs, but. . .

She'd been just too damned busy, and this latest project was sure to be an especially exhausting sort of work since she couldn't get it out of her head that her decisions, or her support for the decisions by GRF's executives, could damage families and towns and maybe destroy the hopes of some of those blue-collar workers to enter professional careers.

Thinking that she really did need a night out, if only to keep her work quality up, Mary thought it might also be a chance for her to let Jake know how she really felt about. . .

What? The buy-out of Baxton? If it even happened. The cut in benefits for Baxton employees? Other than a few high-level officers and some of the direct supervisors, that is. Middle-management might find itself in the same boat as the blue-collar workers and the clerical and secretarial workers.

Mary was beginning to hope the SEC or the Antitrust Division of the Justice Department would kill the buy-out, and then she noticed, to her great relief, that people were filing out of the office. Usually, she stayed a half-hour or even a full-hour late. That quiet time was very productive, and the later commute was a lot more pleasant, and it cut down on the amount of work she had to lug back to her apartment. But, she was tired and might be working a lot of overtime pretty soon.

Maybe very soon. Mr Thornsby had mentioned that the executive committee of Baxton's Board of Directors would be meeting that evening, just about the time Mary would be meeting Jake for dinner. Mary smiled at the silliness of thinking of those meetings as being parallel, even the time ele-

ment was no more than coincidence, and surely a man and woman meeting for a friendly date was nothing like corporate executives meeting to discuss the possible consummation of a merger or an acquisition.

At the very thought of the word 'consummation', Mary could feel the blood draining from her face. Then it shot back up and she feared she was glowing like Rudolph's nose. She began to slip some papers into her briefcase and then she locked some especially sensitive papers in her file-drawer, wondering once more if she needed an enclosed and lockable office for the duration of the Baxton project. She decided she'd discuss the matter on Monday with Mr Simpson, her boss.

And then she rose to take her coat off the hook on the small coat-rack she used in preference to the closet out in the hallway. After picking up her briefcase and pocket-book, Mary began her short trek to the elevator-bank, stopping a few feet down the hall to examine her reflection in the glass panels of the department's main meeting room. She saw nothing upsetting in her image and walked on towards the elevators.

4 Travels with Mary

Mary had decided to get some air and had walked down to Lincoln Center, planning to catch a taxi down to the restaurant from there. After walking along Central Park and reaching the southwest corner of the park, she decided to take the subway instead of a cab. A short walk later, she had descended below street-level and was just putting a token into the turn-stile slot when she heard a train coming down the track. She shook her head and wondered if the situation were ironic. . .

“No,” she said softly while pushing through the turn-stile. “I remember Professor Harrison telling us irony had to do with situations that appeared to be one thing and were actually another. Or something like that. A subway train showing up immediately when I have time to waste is a matter of frustration, not irony.” A quick look around showed that no one else had been on the platform to hear her talking to herself, and she wondered why she would have cared if a stranger had heard her speaking under her breath. Wondering why she was all of a sudden wondering about so many routine matters, she headed for the middle car and checked the occupants quickly through the window. There were about ten people on the car, including a heavy-set black woman with two small children. The little boy, no more than four, was trying to squirm out of his mother’s grasp with such energy that Mary feared someone might get hurt. Bruised at least, but children were made to heal from small injuries. She smiled as she remembered her grandmother saying that after examining a scrape or a bump and assuring Mary, “You’ll likely live, young lady, though you might do serious damage some day if you continue your Tom-boy ways.” And then Mary was confused. Something didn’t seem right about her memories and she suddenly realized, at a gut-level, that it would be terrible to end up like her mother.

With all of her mental energies, Mary Pride dug into her memories and,

at first nothing came—as if the very effort to remember kept away any revivification of her memories. She took a seat across the aisle from the woman with the two children and smiled politely before returning to her struggle and then. . .

To her great relief, she remembered:

It was Grandma who'd told her she'd likely live and Aunt Bessie who always dismissed minor injuries with a smile, a kiss, and the statement that children were made so they would heal easily.

And then she remembered her mother, but all that would come was the frantic activity around the oven in those later years of mental problems. She had been always baking cakes. And cookies. And any thing else that would go into the oven without protest. That had actually started before when Mary was still in college. She'd not yet known anything was seriously wrong though she had noticed her mother telling the same story two or three times within a fifteen minute conversation and acting as if she were saying something fresh each time. The real troubles had not come until a bit later, after Mary had graduated from Smith and returned home while she worked towards her MBA at Western New England College. Her mother's serious symptoms of senility had started when she was sixty or so. That had been young, according to her doctor. "Too old for early-onset varieties of Alzheimer's," he'd added, "but too young for the usual age-onset varieties." Mary was somewhat frightened that she was having trouble remembering what her mother had really been like before that long stretch of memory problems developing into more serious cognitive problems.

"Mom, you even managed to outlive Dad, though it wasn't clear you wanted to, not after you had to be put in that nursing home."

"What was that, Miss?"

Mary looked up at the woman who was smiling in puzzlement even while struggling with the boy who was trying to run down the corridor of the subway car. The little girl was curled up and fast asleep alongside her mother. Mary smiled at the sight and then looked up to the mother, suddenly wondering if the woman really was the mother of the children. She could easily be an aunt or a grandmother or a babysitter returning them to their parents.

But she pushed away such questions and replied, "I was just remembering my mother's sad ending. She had memory problems and my father

had taken care of her at home for more than three years after she was. . .” The woman nodded as if signalling that she understood and Mary went on, “And then Dad died all of a sudden of a heart attack. It was just after I had started to move to New York City. I had gotten an apartment down here and was already on my company’s payroll and then I went back to close up my apartment in Hartford when I got the telephone call, just minutes before it was scheduled to be disconnected. And I drove home right away, but my aunt met me at the door to tell me Dad never even regained consciousness. Mom didn’t even understand what had happened and didn’t have a clear idea who that Wendell fellow had been.”

“Wendell.” The woman spoke slowly and with wonder in her voice. “Such a nice name. Your father?” When Mary nodded, the woman smiled at nothing in particular that could be seen. “That was my grandfather’s name, though I never knew him. He died down in Alabama during the Great Depression. Grandma packed up her five children, including my Dad, and got a ride with a minister who was heading up north to see his son at college. Dad said the man, who’d never attended more than an evening Bible school, was so proud his son had made it into Columbia.” Then she winked at Mary before whispering loudly, “Dad always told the story as if he had been a witness but he was the baby in Grandma’s arms.” There was silence for a moment or two, that is—silence other than the groans and grunts of the little boy who was still trying to get moving down the car.

“My son has as much physical energy as his father.” She looked up at Mary and told her proudly, “My husband played pro football for a year. A safety with the Jets, but he wrenched his back badly when he made an open field tackle on one of those 240 pound running backs. The doctors told him. . .” She sighed and left the bad news unspoken. “He makes a good honest living now, though nowhere near what he made that year. And he got one more good payment on his contract after he had to retire. So we’ve got a nice coop apartment just east of Columbia University and he coaches football and teaches history at a high school up there in Harlem.” With surprising agility for such a heavy woman, she turned in her seat and managed to grab hold of her son with both hands. She lifted him, a strong woman she was, and brought him into a tight embrace on her lap. He wasn’t happy about the situation but didn’t protest too much.

“Is he about four?”

“In a few weeks.” And then the woman looked over at Mary. “You really loved your father, didn’t you? You really looked sad when you spoke

about him dying. And unexpectedly at that.”

“I didn’t know my father as well as I would have liked. He was always at the store. I worked there with him. Started before I was even in school. That is, I did things like helping him to shovel snow. I had one of those shovels that take up a tablespoon of snow at a time. And then, when I was a little older, I would stop in after I got off the bus. Sometimes, he would leave the store under the care of one of his workers. He’d walk me home for cookies and milk, and then I’d go back to the store with him, to help stock. Or maybe to just get in his way. And then when I was legal for work, I worked behind the counter.”

“What kind of store?”

“Hardware. My mother’s father had started the store and then had turned it over to Dad even before he had talked Mom into marrying her. She used to joke sometimes that she had to marry Dad to get a share of her family’s business.” The woman smiled politely which was enough encouragement for Mary to add, “My parents had tried to have another child. I was born after they’d been married for nearly fifteen years so I guess that...” Mary paused, wondered why she was about to spill her guts to this woman, and remembered how easy it was to say some things to someone you never expected to see again. “My grandfather had been trying to tell me for years that I was better off forgetting the hardware store and just going to law school or something like that, but I had gotten used to the idea that I would take over the store some day and I had even started to like the idea.”

“What happened to bring you down to New York City? I mean, if you were planning to take over your father’s store”

“Dad was pretty much forced to sell the store, six or seven years before he died. He got some good money for the land from a fast-food restaurant and then he went to work managing the bathroom fixtures department at a *Hardware Central*.” The woman looked sympathetic, though Mary knew she hadn’t told a story of great physical suffering. No words were spoken for a few seconds and then Mary detected motion out of the corner of her eyes. Before she had even realized what was happening, she’d jumped out of her seat and caught hold of the little boy as he was about to skeddadle down the aisle of the subway car.

“Oh, he is a slippery one, just like his Daddy,” and, with that, the woman accepted her son back onto her lap and then looked out as the train was pulling into the 14th Street Station. As Mary was rising and putting

the strap to her bag over her shoulder, she heard the woman say, “That was a nice save, girl. I’ll bet you were an athlete when you were in school.”

After rushing to the door, Mary turned and, though the woman wasn’t looking her way, told her, “Field hockey, but only my sophomore and junior years in high school.” And then she moved on, shortly finding herself walking on the sidewalk not more than five or six blocks from the restaurant, which she’d not been to in a year or so.

5 Mexico and a Village, a Man and a Woman

The restaurant was much larger inside than a person might have thought from its narrow front. The insides expanded as if unaware of the common-sense rule that the interior of an object was to equal the volume implied by the object's exterior. Deep, deep it was, and multiple its levels. Many its tables and many and fast-moving the young, blonde men who hustled plates of enchiladas to some parties and took drink orders from others.

Mary stood in front of the menu board waiting for Jake to arrive, but she was not studying the specials of the day so much as the customers of the day. They were the cream of Manhattan's young professionals, or at least they were presenting themselves as such in their casual wear of blazers and linen sports-coats; some wearing flannel slacks and others cotton skirts, still others cotton slacks and others flannel skirts. Not a man-made fiber could be seen nor a hair out of place, whether slicked-back or shaped into soft but well-disciplined curls or waves. Pomades and perms were back in style. Pastels, for clothing and not hair, seemed to be the order of the day. There were soft pinks, men's shirts as well as lady's scarves. Light blues in Madras cotton ties worn in defiance of the end of summer as well as casual skirts of a brushed denim. A little bit of sunflower yellow, even some mauve and a touch of sea-foam green. All in all, it worked to set off the tableclothes of white linen and the black and white garb of the waiters.

Hearing someone say, "Ms?" in her immediate vicinity, Mary responded even before she knew if she were the one being addressed. At that, there was a delay of a full breath and then she turned to see the well-dressed man standing a discrete three feet in front of her, a polite smile upon his face. Not just well-dressed, he was in a tuxedo, a bit more than the waiters whose black suits only hinted of such formality.

“I’m waiting for a Mr Preskile.”

The man smiled and said, “Jake,” in a tone scolding her for her false and inappropriate formality. “Jake hasn’t arrived, but I can take you to your table. . .” His voice faded off and he turned his head towards the door, smiling as he noted, “Here he is now.”

With that announcement, the *matre’d* walked over to his podium to fetch a pair of menus. As Jake walked towards Mary, he smiled and made as if to give her a quick hug; she smiled politely and offered her hand. Jake took her hand in a respectful way, though he held it a second longer than Mary had wished. His face was relaxed as he tried to lock her gaze with his, but there was a genial smile upon that lean and hungry face, and he seemed to realize that she was not willing to give him any signs of intimacy.

Graciously, Jake Preskile waved for Mary Pride to follow the *matre’d*. Graciously, he took up the gentlemanly rear. Graciously, he was gracious in the modern manner without. . .

Mary was not herself sure what was the modern manner of graciousness or why it was different from the manner of the 1950s or that of the 1770s or the 1350s. She had no reason to consider Jake to be a lesser gentleman than the seneschal of King Henry the whatever. She had no reason to consider him to be less a scoundrel under his smooth surface than Henry V. Not that she was sure Henry V had been a scoundrel, though she remembered something about him being both a great patriot and a true rascal, at least in Shakespeare’s telling of the tale. And she was wondering why her thoughts were scattering in all sorts of directions, why she was comparing Jake to Medieval lords and kings. Her tastes tended to run more to intellectual and artistic radicals, such as the impoverished artists or writers or critics who used to flourish, in their own hungry way, in New York City—if old tales were to be believed.

And Mary felt uneasy as she asked her self why she had agreed to meet Jake under circumstances that implied a date, a probing for a sexual relationship. And her thoughts continued to scatter themselves all about. She had no particular reason to gather them together—she was enjoying herself. And she let her imagination drift off towards some sort of dive in Greenwich Village, but found she couldn’t form a clear image of the interior. There was time. The night was young, and Mary heard herself giggle with glee. The *Matre’d* was leading her and Jake up the stairs to the loft-like structure that sat half a story above the main entrance.

With her mind still more giddy than before, Mary followed the man up

to that marvelous part of the restaurant. The other time she'd come to *Pedro's*, she had sat down in the darkened bar area. As soon as she reached the top of the stairs, she grinned at the *matre'd* waiting for his two charges and exclaimed, "What a wonderful way to use this building!!" The man bowed slightly and smiled as he accepted the compliment for the sake of those who had designed and built a new interior for a building that looked to her eye to have been a store up front and storage space above and behind. It was just the sort of building that would have served nicely as a studio for a hard-working artist with dozens of large canvases and still more dozens of smaller canvases and pads in various states. . .

Works of art destined to be seen by the public, others not meeting the artist's standards and destined to be scraped and reused or stripped off the frame and tossed into a dumpster if reuse was not possible. Would this building have been better chopped into small, cheap studio apartments for the use of poets who might see the way to a new way of expressing existing ideas, allowing those old ideas to lead to. . .

Mary Pride didn't know. She had some small confidence she could recognize a person with creative courage, but she had less confidence she could judge that bundle of talent and energy which was called 'genius'. She certainly saw in herself no willingness to enter dangerous regions, though she thought she might follow a friend into such regions, might even be willing to commit to a relationship with a man exploring such regions. And she knew she might have been flattering herself, overestimating her courage, overestimating her willingness to fall for a. . .

"Not a corporate reptile!!" she exclaimed to her self silently, but she smiled pleasantly at Jake, having decided he was a nice fellow, though she wasn't one to overvalue niceness. . .

With her mind still circling around interesting ideas, she found herself sitting down as the *matre'd* gently pushed in her chair. Jake waited until she was settled and then he picked up the menu. Mary was vaguely aware that he had waved away the offer of a second menu for her and decided to consider his behavior in the best possible light—he was relieving her of the burden of making decisions. She had a good reason for not wanting to be distracted by any need to study a menu—she preferred to examine her physical surroundings, hoping to see something to further stimulate her imagination. Her eyes passed quickly over her fellow-diners and over the colorful place-settings with their garish yellow and orange and red flowers. Her vision came to a focus upon the seemingly inadequate beams and metal

brackets that supported the loft with surprisingly few attachments to the building's main walls. Clearly, the beams were engineered, wood could be improved upon to make it as strong as the best of steel I-beams.

Engineered... Out loud did Mary let go with a "Hmmmh," as she wondered if she would have been happy being an engineer. Or maybe married to an engineer? A quiet, steady fellow much different from the artist types she found attractive—at least in some of her dreams. Such a man could provide the steady income and she could live her life around the rhythms of a family and some sort of small business, providing perhaps for luxuries and certainly for college educations. "Family hardware stores are no good nowadays but maybe a specialty decorating store where I could be managing crews of remodelers."

Jake looked at her, over the menu. She was amused by the puzzlement showing on his face and decided she might play the game of being a mysterious and somewhat contradictory lady. And she was self-aware to the point where she realized her eyes would now be brightly wide as she let herself ease into a playful mood. At that, she was still feeling a little nostalgic, but no longer in a sad way. In the back of her mind, she saw a figure moving about: her grandfather, pipe in hand, an expression of studious wonder on his face. By some process which Mary knew to be more common to children than adults, her grandfather seemed to magically emerge from her thoughts to stand in the small clearing near the waiter's station over by the stairs. She knew Grandpa was thinking it would have been more efficient to have built a dumb-waiter for it, with its spare plates and cups and napkins, its small counter likely hiding shelves for the bus-boys to place pans of dirty dishes before hauling them down to the kitchen.

Grandpa had solved one technical problem, though perhaps one not noticed by the restaurant management, and Mary saw him setting off to inspect the structure of the loft, disturbing conversations and romances, to point out the miraculous nature of such materials and techniques of construction.

Mary Pride was wishing that she were here with her grandfather rather than with Jake Preskile. It would have been even better if she were behind the counter at the old hardware store, maybe helping to explain to Mr Coogan why traps were necessary in each drain in the house. She'd been only twelve at that time, and Mr Coogan had taken the information just the same as if it had been her grandfather or father who'd spoken. He'd rolled his eyes at the wonder of it all and pulled out his pipe before reaching over

the counter to borrow some of her grandfather's tobacco. "Sewer gases can come up if you don't have traps in each drain? That's the sort of valuable information you don't expect from the mouth of a pretty young lady," he'd said with a hint of a Dutch accent by way of the Hudson River Valley. He'd told her to set up the pipes the way he should install them, though she knew he was going to scatter everything in front of the kitchen sink and then invite his neighbor, Mr Correira, over for a beer.

As long as Mary made sure the right parts were available, Mr Correira would end up making sure they were put together properly. And for his bother, he would go home with a case of beer or perhaps a few large bottles of a Portuguese table wine. Mr Coogan had been thrifty but not cheap, he had just preferred to do business his own way—which he had called the old, neighborly way. If Mr Correira had hinted, in the proper neighborly way, that he wanted a greater payment, Mr Coogan would have provided a more generous gift. But that friendly and hardworking neighbor had never, to Mary's knowledge, made such demands, not when he had cut through the wall of Mr Coogan's house and then installed a bathroom venting fan, not when he'd mixed and poured the concrete for a few sections of sidewalk that had cracked badly.

The waiter had shown up and was standing next to Jake, pencil in hand. As Mary cast aside her fond memories of the hardware business, Jake smiled at her and motioned vaguely outwards with his hands. He asked, "The same for you, Mary?" Feeling more relaxed than she had in a long time, Mary nodded in a languid manner; she then heard the waiter confirm, "Two strawberry Margaritas it is." Mary hated tequila drinks, but she felt free of her work burdens, even free of her general dissatisfaction with her life. She smiled at the waiter, a young fellow of about 25 who was as pretty as any woman Mary had seen lately. The fellow had a pinkish blush on his fair cheeks, and she was certain he had on a very quiet lip gloss as well as mascara. She would have had to use a lot of mascara to make her lashes look that luxurious, but maybe. . .

Jake seemed a little bit unsettled as he broke the silence ensuing upon the departure of the waiter. "I think this Baxton deal is going to go through. The Baxton family wants out, and they know the company is worth a lot more to us than it is to them."

He fell once more into a silence which seemed to be uncomfortable to him. Mary found herself wondering if Jake had any ulterior motives for asking her to dinner. And then she wondered if she were suspicious of him

on a personal basis or . . . She asked herself, “Is he trying to get me to do something on this Baxton deal which he knows will bother my conscience?”

“A penny for your thoughts, Mary.” As if they were eight year-olds, Jake was offering her a shiny, new penny with an impish grin on his face.

She felt disgust well up deep inside but all she said was, “I was thinking that there are so many types of property rights, and many other sorts of rights, but our society has put the rights of corporate bodies on top of the list.”

He pulled the penny back with a look of confusion on his face. “Are you some sort of socialist?”

Mary shook her head and decided to be a bit more honest, or at least a bit more clear, about her thoughts and feelings. “I think there are people who have a stake in any factory or store, and some decisions shouldn’t be made by people who live and work hundreds of miles away and never have to face those workers and local businessmen to tell them they’re losing their livelihoods. And I have a feeling that small businessmen who live in Athol will act in the interests of Athol and its citizens. The investment bankers on Wall Street will have no problem making decisions that might drive a prosperous town into poverty and decay.”

Jake looked just a little shaken, as if he were surprised that Mary knew he’d come from that small town in the northernmost region of central Massachusetts. Mary indulged herself a little in a feeling of self-satisfaction, knowing not only that but also a little of the history of Athol; it had once been on the northern portion of the most advanced industrial region of the 1800s and early 1900s, a region following the railroad lines that ran from Eli Whitney’s Hartford through Springfield with its weapons manufacturers and then on to Athol with a variety of precision machinery operations. Since then, that region had fallen far behind in the race for technological supremacy.

“But it’s people who own those corporations,” protested Jake, though in a quiet voice. “Even if you sometimes have to trace back through several layers of incorporation to reach those flesh-and-blood owners. And all of us have a stake in this system through our mutual funds investments and our pensions. Even social security depends upon the taxes paid by an economy which has large flows of money.”

Mary shook her head, not confident she could hold her own in a debate against Jake, but she decided to press forward. “It’s not the same. I know my grandfather had a stake in the community around him when he

owned his hardware store. That makes all the difference in the world when decisions are being made. At least if you consider businesses to exist for the purpose of serving people and human communities rather than thinking we're all supposed to serve businesses.”

Jake sighed and was silent for just a moment before letting his face settle into an expression which suggested to Mary that he wasn't entirely happy about the world he was so much a part of. In a quiet voice, he told her, “It would be nice if we could make our decisions according to some short-term moral vision, but no person has a trustworthy view of the world. We are all better off in the long-run so long as investors are free to move their capital where it will earn the highest rates of return. In the short-term, there may be some suffering, but that's why we have social security and welfare and all those other government programs—to keep people mobile and free, to keep them from being dependent upon families and local communities which are nice so long as they hold together but they often fall apart.”

Mary remained silent though she wasn't sure she wanted him to continue on this line of conversation, but he took in a deep breath and went on, as if he were repeating words from some lecture he'd heard at the Stanford Business School:

In the end, it's a more charitable system. Capital moves to where it can earn the highest return and create the greatest number of jobs. If businessmen reacted to the concerns of their workers by keeping factories where they no longer belong, it would be worse in the long run. Immoral. The workers wouldn't be forced to adapt by learning new skills or even moving to where the jobs are. Most human beings are creatures of habit. . .

Mary's attention drifted away as she tried to imagine the brackets which fastened the timbers supporting the loft, but not wishing to be impolite, she quickly returned her attention to Jake and heard the lecture continue:

No, the entrepreneurs among us not only have more initiative and more energy; they also compete aggressively with each other, driving each other to innovate, to find inventors and scientists who can innovate, to become more efficient and thus to increase supplies and to drive down prices. All of that activity leads to a better life for all of us.

Seeing that Jake had risen to a missionary pitch of fever, Mary smiled sheepishly as if conceding her own weakness in this hard-edged sort of thought, though she was thinking that economists and financial theorists must be horrible and brutal men to teach their students that they should make their decisions independent of the moral obligations they have to their workers and to their communities. But she also felt bored, or at least fatigued, and decided she wasn't in the mood to fight and was willing to make a tactical redeployment.

Jake smiled uncertainly at her and she returned a smile though she felt like being alone to better remember the days of wandering through antique shops with her grandfather, the days of helping her father to inventory the goods on hand in his store. There had been no computers to do that job automatically as goods were brought in or sold.

While pretending to look around at the nondescript art-work on the walls and at the waiters rushing by, Mary studied Jake. She'd always imagined his face as resembling that of a hawk ten feet above the racing rabbit and descending fast, but she couldn't help thinking he looked to be an awfully confused hawk as he sat in that restaurant. Was he simply out of place? Would he have hardened immediately if they were suddenly transported to a corporate meeting room, or... Had he real feelings for her, feelings which had softened him almost to the point of boyishness when his self-confidence and self-certainty were slightly ruffled, though like most boys he was likely to pretend he were fully sure of himself. She thought the effect would be lost if he were totally routed—she found attractive the thought that his confidence had some of the little boy's bravado in it.

She wondered if she had judged him fairly. It was clear to her she had misunderstood him in some ways, but there were some aspects to his beliefs that bothered her greatly. Still, she felt surprising comfortable as the barrier of silence rose to an impressive height and breadth, though it was transparent enough that she was able to continue studying him, and he seemed to be studying her in return.

Mary barely responded when the waiter delivered the drinks and prepared to take the orders. From his side of the great wall, Jake filled in nicely, as she knew he would, and ordered some sort of enchiladas sampler plate for the two of them. She was not looking straight at him, letting her eyes drift slowly from one window to another, though there was little but brick-fronts to be seen. As indirect as her attention was, she became aware that his eyes were a beautiful blue-gray, even if they were often nar-

rowly and cold-bloodedly focused upon some abstractly financial view of the world...

No, she admitted to herself that she was no longer sure that she knew much at all about his thoughts and feelings, though she didn't like some of what was implied by his behavior in the business world. That made her wonder if his insides were in synch with his external behavior.

As the silence continued, Jake started looking about and his elegant and well-shaped fingers began to drum upon the table. Mary felt her confidence growing, but she decided to give him a break.

"Have you been home lately, Jake?"

Jake winced, and Mary relaxed her smile in sympathetic response. He seemed to struggle for a few seconds before he managed to say, "No, but I've got to get home soon. Mom's got breast cancer, and she's been putting on such a front of nonchalant confidence... And I don't even know what tests she's gone through lately or what treatments they might be trying... She and Dad just slide by any questions I put to them on the phone and... Well, that's the way they are. They don't want to worry any of us." In explanation, he added, "My brother in California says they aren't being very open with him either."

"I can understand how you feel. When my mother went into her final phases of Alzheimer's last year, my Aunt Bessie decided to downplay everything until the end was coming. I was really busy about that time and I didn't get up there until she was in a coma."

Jake nodded sympathetically. "Would it have really made a difference? I mean if she had Alzheimer's and it was advanced and..."

"It would have made me feel better to see her a few times during her last year. Even if I'd just sat at the side of her bed and even if she hadn't recognized me."

Jake sighed, but not sadly, and a smile came to his face as he told Mary, "Once I visited my mother while she was in the hospital for extensive tests and she made me sing for her. At her bedside while nurses and orderlies were coming in and out."

Mary giggled and then asked, "Were you paying them back for treating your mother badly?"

"No, actually..." Jake laughed a bit loudly, drawing the attention of the diners at several tables. He paid no attention to them. "Actually, I've got quite a good voice. Not enough power or range to sing lead roles in an opera, but I can do quite well in a church choir or a choral group. I even

sang a small tenor solo from *Ein fest Burg ist unser Gott* out in California. Not a Stanford choral group. A choral group that practiced and performed at an Episcopalian church, though there were all sorts of people: Jews and Hindus and pagans and even Congregationalists.”

“You speak German?”

“One title of one cantata does not make someone a German orator.”

“No, but a few words are often enough. . .”

Mary wasn’t able to complete her thought or her spoken sentence before the waiter showed up and quickly set out the platter of enchiladas and their plates. He smiled in a way that led Mary to suspect he actually enjoyed his job. As she was smiling back at him, his eyes quickly surveyed the table. “Is there anything else you need right now? I see you haven’t touched the tortilla chips.”

Mary left it up to Jake to handle the formality of letting the fellow go and then, as the waiter was walking away, she admitted, “I have met some singers who were coached to sing in languages they didn’t really speak or understand.”

While filling his plate from the sampler platter, Jake shook his head. “I’m reasonably fluent, though rusty, in French and German. Even took some Latin back in school.”

“That will come in handy if you ever try to buyout the Vatican.”

“I wouldn’t mind being able to buy some of their pieces of art, but. . .”

He blushed and said, “I’m sorry. I should have let you go first.”

She just shook her head gently, leaving Jake still blushing a little as he handed her the serving spoon. He didn’t seem to know what to say next. Mary didn’t see a need to say much of anything but she had the impression he wasn’t comfortable being silent around her, though she hadn’t a clue why not. True it was that they didn’t know each other well. Equally true that they had some serious differences of opinion, but she was starting to feel comfortable around him.

The silence didn’t last long this time before Jake spoke, “How about you? I mean, do you like to sing?”

“I like to sing and my voice isn’t bad. But it doesn’t belong out front at all. Even for a solo of limited range. I belong in the choir stall. In the rear if possible.”

“Not possible. In any choir I’ve ever seen, the men were smart enough to put the women out front so everybody could see them when mistakes were made.” And he smiled as if to make sure she knew he was joking.

Mary let her eyes drift over the nearby tables and suddenly she felt agitated. It seemed to her that various sorts of propositions were being made, miscellaneous deals being proposed. The parties at some of the table too closely resembled corporate negotiating sessions for her tastes, but even that irritation quickly passed away, and she drained her Margarhita just as the waiter set a second one in front of her. She immediately took a sip of that one, not much concerned that he might think her a heavy drinker. Or Jake. . .

It was just then that Jake popped the question she'd been waiting for, "Why don't we head down to the Village and make a night of it? Mr Thornsby said he wouldn't be calling until after he meets with the target's board tomorrow and that doesn't start until ten or so. The Board didn't want to meet too early in case they have a late meeting tonight. And they might since the key family members and top executives will likely make their provisional decision." For just a second, Mary thought he was about to slip into his intense business mode; she feared he was starting to make a list of all the tasks to be done to finalize the deal if the Baxton board gave their initial approval, but then he seemed to relax. "So. . . We've got a Friday evening to kill and all Saturday morning to sleep in."

Mary must have said yes, or maybe nodded yes as she was draining her second Margarhita, because the next few minutes were a blur until the cold air hit her face as she stepped out on the sidewalk. Jake was able to hail a cab in just seconds, and soon they were on their way to La Fakerie or some such place. Mary's hearing didn't seem to be functioning quite right. Neither was her body quite balanced, and, when the cabbie took a sharp corner, she went crashing against Jake, and he shifted around for her benefit so she ended up leaning her head on his shoulder and closing her eyes as she tried to regain her bearings. After that, the ride seemed to take only a few seconds, and then she was in the cold air again as Jake settled matters with the cabbie.

He was only a few seconds behind her in getting in the door to the coffee-house. There were only two tables occupied and she moved towards one of the two open window tables. Window seats were worth even more in Greenwich Village than in the rest of Manhattan with all the interesting characters walking about, day and night—but mostly at night. Who could tell if one of them was a great novelist or sculptor? Perhaps the modern composer who would produce a major piece of music of lasting interest to someone besides a professor of music? Italy's latest and greatest tenor out

to see the town before settling down to prepare for his role at the Met?

Mary's head was spinning as Jake helped her off with her coat, and he had gone to the counter to fetch their cappuchinos before she noticed the fellow two tables away was studying her, though only at the edges of his vision; he was pretending to examine the wall behind her. Turning, Mary saw a large menu mounted there, but she wasn't much interested in menus. She had been reminded of her naive desires from her early weeks in New York City when she had expected to see people walking down the street who were. . .

"What visual signs or smells would a genius give off while walking down the street?" The question seemed so interesting to her that she barely paid any attention to the strange look that the young bearded man had given her before he'd gone back to pretending indifference to her presence. She felt on-edge. She was wishing it were still the days when every great American writer stayed in the Village for a year or more before moving on to visit Gertrude Stein's off-beat salon in Paris. At that, Mary thought Gertrude Stein had once stayed in Greenwich Village on her way from Oakland to Europe. Even lesser artists, serious and substantial folk-singers and songwriters. . .

She really wasn't sure if she could recognize the genius in a young Woody Guthrie if she were to hear such a fellow singing on a street corner or strumming his guitar on the platform down in a subway station. It must have been a wonderful time when you could come to the Village and hear Joan Baez in one night-spot before moving next door to hear Jimi Hendrix playing in anything from a blues band to a country-western foursome.

She felt suddenly sick about her life in the business world, but that mood quickly evaporated and she turned to stare boldly at the fellow studying her surreptitiously. She was under the impression that he'd been staring out the window before she'd come in, but that might have been just a presumption based on her own habits. Or maybe her impression that he was fascinated by her was no more than her ego getting away from her. But there were enough signs to make him interesting to her. And he was a type. . .

Did she have any reason to suspect he was some sort of genius? Or at least. . .

He seemed to have some of the intensity which was necessary to the development of genius, though he looked to be on the excessively polite side. Or maybe reserved. She wondered if he were merely too timid to stare at her directly. Perhaps because she was with another man. She'd

been through it before and knew that his hints of interest in her, combined with a refusal to show that interest directly was...

She freely admitted, though only to herself, that she was interested in the man, though not necessarily in a romantic way. She'd been friendly with on-the-edge and on-edge intellectual types back in college and she had found them to be fascinating fellows.

Detecting the man's unrest as she studied him, she found herself feeling playful and studied him all the more openly.

He had curly hair about a month out of control, so that the curls dripped over his ears and halfway down his forehead, no more. With his straggly and short beard, he might have been the type to carefully keep himself unkempt but not so much as to cause respectable people to walk across the street to avoid him. She giggled as she thought it was the look that Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen had seemed to cultivate when they had concerts coming up. Or photo shoots for album covers. The look would have been more complete if he'd had a leather jacket instead of a magenta L.L. Bean jacket, but he had such intense eyes. So she thought. He was doing his best not to meet her eye-to-eye. She smiled as the fellow blushed noticeably, and was beginning to wonder if he was a regular when Jake stepped into the path of her vision and whispered, "Is that someone you know?"

Mary looked away and glanced quickly out the window, wishing it were warm enough for weird and wonderful people to be walking about and showing off. Then she sighed before saying, "No. He just reminded me of several guys I knew in college. Shaggy and intense. Usually, that intensity was directed towards computers. Sometimes political science."

"That explains it." When Mary widened her eyes at Jake, he responded, "Hanging around poli sci majors. That explains your confusion about economic and moral matters."

Mary smiled again, but this time she had to force the smile. She was in no mood to argue with Jake, but she was no longer in a mood to sit and listen to his lectures about the magic that was to be had in mobile capital and denatured people, but it was with the gentlest of voices that he said, "You look exhausted. Maybe I should see you home." Mary met his eyes, as difficult as it was for her to focus on such a demanding sight as a pair of human eyes. And she realized she really was damned tired. Worn-out emotionally and mentally and physically.

Without even needing a response on her part, Jake came around and helped Mary with her coat. As he did so, her eyes wandered and she

noticed the disheveled fellow was now studying her a bit more boldly, and she giggled as she settled the coat on her shoulders. Mary felt Jake's hands on those same shoulders as he steered her towards the door, and she was content to let him guide her, though it suddenly bothered her that they were leaving the coffees and deserts untouched.

At that, she was more interested in contrasting an ambitious corporate executive with a dangerous intellectual in a magenta LL Bean jacket. Assuming that stranger were really the sort of man Mary was guessing, but she had always been pretty good at judging people's characters. That was one of the reasons for her success as a personnel manager, that is, she rarely made hiring mistakes.

But she didn't really want to be...

And she turned to ask, "What do I want to be when I grow up, Jake?" He just shook his head and then he reached past her to push open the door.

6 An Explicit Proposition

As soon as Mary stepped forth from the coffee-shop, she was hit by a blast of cold air. A strong wind was coming from the east, though it was hard to know if that was where it had originated. There were so many tall and sturdy structures erected by men and the winds could swirl unpredictably.

Mary watched Jake as he walked towards the curb to try to hail a taxi, but she stayed close to the building, not sure if there was any real protection from the swirling wind, but it seemed worth a try. And, anyway, she was tired and was willing to lean on one of these dirty New York City buildings. While she was standing there, her arms wrapped about herself, holding the coat tight against her body, the door to the coffee-shop opened again. The fellow with the shaggy locks came out and walked right past her without so much as a glance, though she flattered herself that he had to make a great effort to keep his eyes from her. Maybe he was struggling against a desire to approach her. “And maybe I’m crazy or at least tired. I don’t have any reason to want his attention, though he looks to be a nice enough fellow.”

She had returned her eyes to Jake to see him walking her way, a frustrated expression upon his face. “I think we’d have a better chance of catching a cab if we go up to the corner. And we should move along briskly because it’s getting colder by the second.”

In a mood to let someone else make the decisions, Mary just nodded and accepted his arm. They set off down the sidewalk in the direction already taken by that man in the magenta jacket, but they’d not gotten far when they heard a sound in the shadows, as if a nylon parka were rubbing against itself. Jake tried to pull her on, but Mary was suddenly alert to the smells of coffees and fresh pastries on the slight and bitterly cold breeze. She managed to slow him down as she peered into the shadows, knowing full well this was not behavior appropriate for the streets of New York, not even a brightly lit street in Greenwich Village, a host of store-fronts glowing

with offers of cappuchino and beer and open mike folk music concerts.

Perhaps the slowing of their gait provided the stimulus. . .

Perhaps it was just something on the wind. . .

Perhaps it was the sexual tension that had developed between Mary and Jake. . .

Mary knew not why the creature asked, “Youse two interested in some threesome action?” Her voice was both young and hard and it came out of the darkness of the doorway to a store. Mary could see the words “Deli” and “Produce” on the windows, but not much else. But she stared for a few seconds and her eyes adjusted to the darkness which contained a very small woman with short blonde hair. She was wearing an ankle-length nylon parka of some dark color. That parka was unbuttoned and the hooker was shivering, but she opened it to reveal. . .

The body of a girl just entering puberty.

She stood a shade under five feet and her bony hips barely pushed out against the white pants that were so short Mary imagined she could see the prostitute’s pubic hairs, and maybe she could, or maybe the woman shaved to maintain the illusion of youth. The woman’s breasts were just as girlish; the legs were slender and tight, but the face was that of a street-hardened woman in her early or mid-twenties. Having watched some television documentaries on the American sex-trade, Mary knew a woman like this would have been able to make good money back when her face told the same lie about her age as did her underdeveloped body. She certainly wouldn’t have had to solicit tricks on the streets of Greenwich Village, and then. . .

Mary and Jake were still both frozen, speechless and unable to move on when the streetwalker’s face lit up with rage. “You gonna just peep or you want some action?” A few seconds passed slowly and then the woman spat out sarcastically, “You look like nice folk, so I’ll do you both for a hundred bucks. . .”

Jake shook himself as if awakening from an intoxicating nightmare and turned as if to walk away. The woman tried again, “Mister, how’s about I go down on your babe while you mount me from behind. You can just watch if you want and then do your girl after you’re hot.”

“I’m not. . .” Jake managed to stammer out before choking. After a pause to gather his breath, he added, “interested.” Mary wasn’t convinced and neither was the streetwalker, but the whore was fighting some sort of a battle within herself. Mary knew not what that battle was—the information from all those documentaries on New York street-life seemed so inadequate.

And then it struck her. The whore, who was a young woman if not quite the girl promised by her small breasts and slender hips, was a drug addict. She was enraged but holding back her anger because she was desperate for a fix of some sort. It wasn't yet clear that Jake was going to walk away from this opportunity though Mary was sure she would never. . .

At least she thought she wouldn't. . .

And she didn't even think she was interested in Jake in a normal sexual way, let alone. . .

And she was glad when she realized that Jake was leading her away from a scene so degrading and so. . .

And she was confused though, "Nothing really happened to make us feel ashamed."

Jake seemed not to have heard her words and continued walking down the streets, his arm holding hers tightly against his side, his eyes straight ahead. For reasons she couldn't state even to herself, Mary felt humiliated and confused. While she was in such a muddle, she caught sight of a movement on the far side of the street, as if there was maybe another whore catching the east-bound traffic. Another step and there was a glint from a street-lamp; there was a hint of red. Magenta?

Neither Jake and Mary said a word on the journey down to the next corner where he was able to hail a cab within seconds. All that time she had a feeling of being watched, though she was afraid it was perhaps the ghost of her father or her grandfather, having come back to watch over a young woman who had displayed, if only to herself and Heaven, a lack of character. . .

But she'd not wanted to do anything disgusting. She was pretty sure she didn't even want to do anything normal with Jake. She heard herself muttering, "Normal" and felt herself blush in the dark of the cab, but Jake was still playing the role of a gentleman and pretending she'd not uttered a word.

While Mary was trying to regain her self-respect, the cab moved rapidly northward, towards the place where she kept her clothes and her collection of salt and pepper shakers, the place where she laid down her tired body to rest at night. And she suddenly wished she could recapture the feelings she'd had back in that coffee-shop. . .

But she couldn't quite remember what those feelings had been. She leaned against Jake, though she was intending a sisterly gesture rather than a romantic cuddle. She whispered, "Thank you for a wonderful night.

That little incident was just. . .”

He patted her arm which was reaching across her body to hold onto his forearm. Somehow it took no more than that to make her feel warm and safe, though she had been in no real danger, but something had gone wrong inside of her and she felt some sort of shame. She was hoping her parents and grandparents had not been looking down from Heaven at that moment to see their little girl. . .

But she'd done nothing wrong, had not even had a conscious thought of doing anything wrong. At least, not a well-formed conscious thought. And she felt ashamed again, though not sure why. Feeling comfortable as she leaned against the shoulder of a man who'd somehow made it through a strange crisis better than her. . .

“But,” Mary protested to herself, “some of his moral ideas are so. . .”

And she fell into silence, inside and outside as she decided not to even try to complete her last thought. Mary kept her head against Jake's shoulder and he kept his arm around her. It seemed to be only seconds after they left Greenwich Village when Jake gently shook her and announced, “We're here. At your apartment building.” He got out of his side of the cab and helped Mary to slide out and exit by the same door. With his hand firmly holding her elbow, he guided her to the bottom of the stairs and stayed there, watching as she went up. As she began to reach into her pocket-book for her key, she noticed he was still standing there, watching her. She opened the door and turned. He was just starting his short walk to the cab. Before getting back into the taxi, he smiled and waved, saying only, “I'll see you in the office on Monday, Mary, unless Mr Thornsby calls us in this week-end. In either case, we should be moving fast to consummate the affair.”

The word 'consummate' sent a fresh shiver up Mary's spine, but she smiled and waved at Jake's back, half-suspecting he had surprised himself by his word choice. As she closed the door behind her, Mrs Grogan was confronting her, mailbox key in her hand, but she'd likely checked the box a good five or six times—after the mail had been delivered but before all the young women in the building had returned to their apartments. She was a nice lady and truly concerned for those young women, but Mary had found it most remarkable that a woman partly crippled up with rheumatism could be up on her feet and constantly moving up and down the hallway between the front door of her apartment and the front door of the building. Smiling at the eighties lady and ejecting a friendly but brisk, “Good evening,”

Mary walked up the stairs.

7 Lonely is as Lonely is

After hanging up her jacket, Mary went into the kitchen and set the tea-kettle to boil before heading into her bedroom to change her clothes. The evening's wear came off easily enough, but when she'd put on her panties and a comfortable sports-bra, Mary tossed a silk running-suit on her bed only to find herself lingering in front of the dresser.

The bottom drawer held her sexier lingerie. Little used. She wasn't married and she'd mostly behaved the way she'd been raised to behave. There had been Jeff in college and then two guys during her three years in New York—Tim and... She realized to her great horror that she couldn't remember the name of that engineering grad student that she'd dated for several months. They'd only had sex once, and it hadn't worked out real well. She thought he'd had some sort of a confidence problem, though maybe there'd been something he'd needed or expected from her, something she hadn't given to him. He was half Japanese, and his friends had called him 'Saki' after the distilled wine, though she'd never understood why. He hadn't been a heavy drinker, but...

She couldn't even remember his given name.

Simon? No, but something like that, maybe beginning with an 'S'.

They'd dated for several months, slept together once.

And she couldn't remember his name!

The tea-kettle began to whistle, interrupting her thoughts before she could resolve anything. It wasn't so much forgetting his name that bothered Mary. It was more...

After taking the kettle off the burner and setting it on the metal trivet, Mary reached into the cupboard and froze as she wondered once again, "What was his name?" She managed to retrieve a tea-cup and then reached into another cabinet to fetch a tea-bag which was soon sitting in the little china tea-pot she'd brought back from her mother's house; it had once

belonged to her grandmother.

Feeling once more sadly nostalgic, and out of place in her own place, Mary looked about the kitchen.

It was small, not like the kitchens in the duplex shared by her parents and her grandparents. This sort of kitchen was not made for mass-production of oatmeal cookies or for preparing a Thanksgiving feast with seemingly dozens of different hot foods besides salads and breads and deserts. Many of the breads had been fresh-baked the night before the feast, Easter as well as Thanksgiving.

But...

So what if her kitchen was small? She'd gotten it to the point where it was both functional and attractive. She had painted the walls a fresh yellow, the trim white. There was a border of garden vegetables where walls met ceiling and another of country homes just above the counter-top. Hokey, but she didn't mind. After all, sometimes hokey was a synonym for comfortable and, in the last year or so, she'd found herself valuing comfort to an extent...

"I'm starting to feel uncomfortable about comfort?"

Mary Pride shook her head and continued her survey.

The range was small but it had two ovens, one below and one mounted above the stove-top, and that top oven was also a microwave unit. There was a small refrigerator of an almond hue to match the range. A toaster oven and a can-opener with knife-sharpener were mounted below a cupboard, and other cupboard bottoms held a towel rack and a dispenser for both aluminum foil and plastic wrap. She'd brought from her mother's house a photograph of the Firth of Forth from some angle that showed only water and hills. Not having any idea whether there were any towns or cities on the Firth of Forth, she didn't know what to think of that particular angle. She had no idea if it would even be a nice site to visit as some parts of Scotland were said to be damp and depressing, but she liked the name and the picture.

She poured some hot tea into her cup and chanted, "Firth of Forth," several times while wagging her head back and forth to the rhythm. Then she giggled and walked off to sit at her almost new kitchenette set. Real wood, though it was only pine stained a maple color. But it was pretty well-made. With her background, Mary knew to look underneath furniture, at the joints and other connections. She could recognize good hardware and could tell if the wood had been worked properly. She could even judge the

quality of the drawer and its hardware. It helped to know how something should be built, and most people didn't know. They never had any exposure to hardware stores, except to buy the occasional can of paint or flashlight batteries, and they weren't around wood-working fathers and grandfathers. Mary wasn't at the mercy of some conglomerate that paid to have furniture assembled in southeast Asia with the cheapest components available. She knew quality and she knew junk. She could even tell when an almost-good piece of furniture had been built with one too many corners cut.

Her eyes passed to the china cabinet which had come with the table. It had been a tight squeeze to get it into the kitchen, but it gave her the shelf space she needed to show off her collection of salt and pepper shakers. There was a Jack and Jill. A Humpty Dumpty poured out pepper while a gathering of the King's men were prepared to pour salt on his wounds. A pair of Scottish terriers and another of geese, each pair having one member white and one black, of course. There were dozen others as well as a box full of them in her Aunt Bessie's attic.

Mary couldn't even remember how she'd started the collection, but it was her grandfather who'd helped her to hunt down interesting specimens. On lazy summer days, he'd driven her all over Western Massachusetts, looking through junk shops, antique shops, and kitchen wares shops. It didn't matter when they didn't find anything worth buying. One set of shakers for every few days of venturing forth was about all they had asked for, and there were all the hamburgers and ice cream cones at road-side stands from Peru to Holland.

The tears were flowing so that Mary couldn't even make out her collection any more. When it reached the point where the china cabinet was an unidentifiable blur, she pushed aside her tea-cup and put her head down on her arms and wondered why the hell she was where she was. And she wondered why the hell it was so bad when she was really pretty...

And her head shot back up as the word came:

comfortable

Part II

Seduction From the Inside Out

8 An Economic Unit is Dislodged

Bayard Raines stood at the small table he was using as a desk. In this one-room apartment, everything had to be small, or else it wouldn't fit. Everything about him was small but for his ambition, and he feared he'd let that grow out of control. He'd not wanted much, or so he'd thought while planning his break with his old life, but he was already suspecting it was no small thing to try to stand outside of society to gain an objective perspective, and it was the dangerous sort of thing not to be done unless you were not only well-intentioned but also quite courageous and strong-willed and fully dedicated to a task which might well not be impossible under the social and historical circumstances. It was not nearly enough to think in terms of the goal itself because, at best, it was not likely to be something fully accomplished within the time or the space of a single life.

And then he felt a smile come to his lips as he suddenly wondered if that woman he'd seen in the coffee-shop. . .

No, she had been well-dressed, in the manner of a young executive. It wasn't likely she would be interested in anyone who wished to do some good. No, he was sure she would be looking for a fellow doing well, not doing good.

"But you didn't disrupt your life and come down here to find a woman, Mr Raines. You came down to observe and to be ready to come up with. . ."

And he wasn't sure what the purpose was in this attempt to turn himself into a true outsider that he might. . .

He saw that the cold night air had frosted the storm window and lifted the sash to write:

THE ABOVEGROUND MAN

The script was nothing to impress a calligrapher, but it was the best he could manage. He considered the result to be satisfying, except for what it revealed of the world outside and below this fourth floor walk-up. What he saw through the cleared streaks was a trash dumpster, probably for the Chinese restaurant in the next building.

Men and their garbage, filling up the world. . .

Somehow, it seemed to him there must be more to observe and more to say about that dumpster, but he wasn't sure what that more might be. He noticed something pink moving near that dumpster. "Probably a circular flying about in the night. An advertisement for a new nail salon, undoubtedly. Or a comic book-store. Good book-stores are going out of business, but the people of this world are always ready to buy more picture-books and see more movies about an insect-man."

Bayard thought about the contrast between the insides and outsides of modern people: insides filled with images from movies and television shows, images of violence and hatred and perverse emotions; outsides so elegantly coiffed and clothed and manicured, so gentle and compassionate in mannerisms and speech. He shuddered and asked no one in particular:

What will happen if all those images of hatred and violence stored up inside modern people are ever released?

He knew there had been a different sort of image in the Bible that had seen the insides of such people as being dead rather than boiling over with images of hatred and violence. . .

White sepulchers? Bleached spotlessly clean on the outside and full of death on the inside? But Americans didn't have corpses inside so much as they had living creatures being ripped apart by bullets and bombs, women and children being raped or beaten, men and women and children being overpowered and overmatched by machines. . .

People no longer had private insides, only hard and crusty tanks filled with whatever was served up to them by the entertainment industry, including its news and publishing subsidiaries. . .

And then those tanks would be emptied. . .

And a new round of entertaining movies and songs and news documentaries would pour in more images of rape, of bodies being torn to pieces, of human beings giving themselves over to evil. . .

“Why,” Bayard wondered, “do people allow that to be done to them? If there is a Satan, he has no power to push those images of needless pain and gratuitous suffering and whole-hearted degradation into the insides of God’s other creatures; the people watching the worst, even some of the supposed best, of modern movies and television shows are inviting that stuff inside of them. Hellish images preparing people for eternity in Hell. . .”

Bayard caught himself up short. He’d not even given much thought for years to religion. Why was he thinking of Hell now? True enough, a Schwarznegger movie was certainly not intended to prepare a mind or soul for holy thoughts and feelings. Could a people damn themselves simply by choosing Hellish thoughts and images in this life, before God’s final judgment confirmed those choices?

But that seemed a matter quite far off. What Bayard knew for sure was:

People have given up any power they had to shape their own inner lives or the inner lives of their children. That power had also been stripped away, rather—given up—by churches, by local communities, and by voluntary and traditional organizations of all sorts.

For some short time, his mind drifted, not able or willing to concentrate its efforts upon any of the horrible lines of thought to which he, the thinker, had directed it. And then he returned his attention to immediate surroundings: he looked down and saw no pink fluttering about in the wind. The circular or whatever it had been must have gotten wedged behind that dumpster. Closer to the entrance of the alley, he could see someone moving. A man? A large man? But he’d seen shadow more than substance and now even the shadow was gone. Maybe that pink piece of paper had been something important and that poor man had been chasing it as it blew away on the wind?

For a moment, he thought about running down and seeing if he could catch the poor fellow and help him find that piece of pink paper, but that seemed too absurd for words. It was more likely the shadow had been that of a mugger or other person lurking about and looking for some profitable mischief to keep him going that night.

And then Bayard laughed at the thought that even a dumpster sitting in a quiet, dark alley would have a tale of its own to tell, but New York

City could have been called the City of a Billion Stories, if someone were inclined to such hyperbole. And maybe it was true that the Mob had once dumped the corpse of some victim in that very dumpster. And maybe it held a bag of cash thrown there by a bank-robber who was only minutes ahead of capture. Maybe it was really a bin used by alien archaeologists to collect artifacts from Earthling society.

Bayard could almost feel his ambition shifting to aim at a far lower goal: to do no more than make some sense of the world about him. He would have given much for a story that made sense of his life and his society. After all, a story. . .

That effort to make sense of a world gone mad, that was why he had come to New York, figuring it was a better place than any other to at least find a few clues as to what men had done and were doing with their world. No, the important issues were those dealing with the insides of people. To explore those issues, he had stepped outside of society, giving up his career, becoming an outsider to decent society. He needed to observe, to see what was invisible to the fools who were convinced that this world was the best of all possible worlds. At the very least said the fools, modern America was the greatest time and place to live in all of human history.

But they were not entirely foolish. There was a large amount of truth in that claim: the United States did have the best medical care and the best sanitation, the highest standard of living in history.

But how could a people be so gentle and decent as Americans seemed to be if they were forming their insides with the mindless and hateful crap being spilled out by the American entertainment industry? If that junk was really staying inside modern souls, if it were taking on some sort of monstrous life in even a small percentage of modern people, it might eventually erupt.

And how could anyone retain a healthy view of human beings after a steady diet of entertainment which presented people in such a degrading manner? So insulting to men and women in different ways, to Blacks and Whites and Orientals in different ways. The world was separating into predators and victims and the major difference between American society and earlier societies run by exploiters was quite simple:

Under the American system, everyone, including exploiters had agreed to some sort of social contract that each and every one of them, including the exploiters and their own children, were

to be left in the open to be more easily preyed upon.

Bayard Raines shuddered and then peered back down at the dumpster, sure, for some obscure reason, that some great truth about modern human society lay hidden within it. Or perhaps behind it? And then he shook his head to rid himself of such a silly thought. It was only a dumpster, likely filled with empty cans that had once held water chestnuts, other cans now packed with old grease, filthy paper napkins, and other products of a wasteful society. That was all the meaning it held; it was a sign of a wealthy people filling the world with its garbage.

The most mundane of all sights was that dumpster. “Banal,” and with that word, he turned away from the window, thinking that maybe a poet could do something with the image of garbage, of filth viewed from above by a man who’d deliberately set himself apart from his fellow-men that he might do them good, a man who’d separated himself from his fellow-citizens not from any sort of hatred or disgust, but rather from a love that would allow him to observe, to analyze objectively, and to determine what had gone wrong with a society that had done so much to solve man’s problems in a sometimes harsh world. And then it had gone on to destroy the possibilities of the inner self that constituted the foundation of a true human freedom, true moral integrity.

Bayard could take the idea no further and he wondered if he needed to read more in psychology and other brain-sciences before he presumed to speak about the proper nature of the human mind and soul. Trying to follow up that idea, he lost track of his own thoughts. . .

And then his insides calmed down and he returned. . .

To this invasion of the mind-snatchers, the destruction of the private and inner self, the forcing of all minds and souls into the public marketplace. Governments at all levels pretended to be concerned about the education of children but all they were doing was diverting badly needed funds to high-tech gimmickry which worked to the goal of crippling the individual within that the child might be more efficiently exploited.

Bayard Raines sighed, feeling heavy of chest. The air circulation didn’t seem to be all that good in New York City as a whole and certainly not in this building. The lack of fresh air had added to his problem of physical and emotional exhaustion; it was only his mind that was energetic and ready to go. But not until his body and his soul had been somewhat refreshed. Two nights he’d spent wandering the streets of New York City when he

wasn't staring at the light fixture on the ceiling of his apartment. And he'd spent so many restless nights during the weeks right before he'd left his home-town. One night of solid sleep without so much as a single nightmare would have been a blessing, but he was still looking forward to such a night, without much hope of receiving such a gift. If it did come, he would be able to start seriously upon the intellectual and spiritual task he'd set out for himself.

Deciding he needed to get out and get some fresh air, Bayard Raines closed the sash and stood up. He turned into his studio apartment. The place was furnished with a toaster oven, a counter-top burner unit, a small sink, and a refrigerator of the sort students took into their dorm rooms. He'd added a four-cup coffee-maker, three unmatched stoneware plates, a handful of forks and spoons and knives from his mother's junk drawer.

The most personal of those few items in the apartment, besides his clothes, were the four coffee-mugs which were tokens of some of his own experiences. One was from a tennis club where he had played Saturday morning matches against fellow high school teachers; one from the gift shop at Yellowstone showed a grizzly bear scratching his butt on a tree; another quoted Mark Twain:

The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco.

That memory-laden mug came from the trip he took with his roommate the summer after his sophomore year of college. Still another mug for addictive substances was shockingly juvenile—it was a New York Yankees mug. “But,” he told himself, “that is a pretentious and snobbish attitude. Professional sports, sports all down the line, can be a part of a healthy life of individuals. . .”

After a few seconds of mental confusion, he spoke aloud to his empty apartment: “The moral duty to develop one's own insides, to become a morally free human being, doesn't preclude participation in a variety of social activities. One can be a fan of professional sports, at least those emphasizing skill and fitness over violence and still be a healthy individual to the point of being eccentric.”

Realizing that he himself had not done much to develop himself as a social and cultural being, had not attended many concerts or stage-plays, Bayard Raines felt his face flushing. Not needing more inner turmoil to

exhaust him and keep him awake at night, he turned his thoughts back to his belongings.

The entire inventory had taken less than three minutes, and it had taken so long only because of the social commentary. For no reason he could have stated, Bayard Raines laughed, not a nasty laugh but an open, good-natured laugh. He wished there was someone else in his life to hear him laugh. “Not many my belongings, for sure, but I need few things for the task I’ve taken upon my shoulders.” Too many things, too much comfort, might have even been a danger. He might yet be diverted from his duty.

And, if he were steadfast in that duty, if he finished his task? That is, if he managed to step outside of society and to analyze it to tell everyone what had gone wrong? What then? Could he just die peacefully, content in his great accomplishment? Certainly, he could not go back to the mainstream of life, but he was already ruined for that sort of life anyway. Before leaving his old life behind, he’d known his ruination was a pre-condition for taking on his task and he would never be able to enjoy an ordinary life embedded in the ordinary institutions of human society.

Resolving to save his own sanity, at least so long as he needed it for his task, Bayard Raines went to the closet and pulled out his jacket. He thought about grabbing his winter parka instead, but a moment was all it took to realize what a mistake that would be. If he let his system grow accustomed to winter clothing during October, even a cold one, what would he do if it turned out to be an Arctic January or February? Not knowing how long it would be before he had a source of income, he didn’t want to spare the money to buy fancy thermal underwear or down coats. His mother would have sent him some money, for sure, but that would leave him dependent upon another person, would leave him a parasite of sorts, and he needed his absolute independence to carry out his chosen mission.

9 Another Economic Unit Reaches the City of Financiers and Pimps

Missie lay sleeping, squeezed in between a trash bin and the brick wall of the adjacent building. Exhausted and frightened, she had desperately needed sleep the night before and so she had settled into this disgusting place after hiding there to escape the man who'd chased her. She had known from the twisted smile on his face that he had no good on his mind.

It wasn't just the uncomfortable position that had kept Missie from getting much sleep. She was cold, having on no more than a light pair of blue slacks, a cotton shirt with blue and yellow flowers against a light blue background, and a pink wind-breaker. She'd been cold since running away from that elderly couple in Maryland and that had been three days before.

While she was still thinking about her terrible situation, Missie heard a great racket, seemingly someone pounding on a huge metal drum. She readied herself to flee danger once more, but when she started to jump up to a running position, her right shoulder smashed into something hard and she realized she was squeezed into a fetal position between that trash bin and that brick wall. She grimaced as she felt something greasy when she put her hand down to push up off the ground. When she pulled her hand up, it was covered with some gloppy stuff, grease with coffee grinds and pieces of celery and other trash in it. And it was even worse than that. . .

The glop smelled! Real bad.

Keeping her voice down, she allowed herself to whisper, "Yuchh!" And she was silent, even as she realized that she smelled as well, even without the glop on her seat. Not as bad as the glop with its embedded garbage, but she'd not had a bath or shower since she'd made it to New York two days

prior, and she was smelling a bit like some of those white-trash boys down at the park near her stepfather's house. It was also her mother's house now. But Missie was determined to see that it not become her house, just as her mother had been determined to separate herself from the house she'd once owned with Missie's father.

Missie had not had many chances to clean up on the four day trip from Birmingham. That elderly couple that had given her a ride from Savannah to just north of Baltimore had let her use the shower in their camper, but she'd had to cut the shower short as she heard the woman come back in to say to her husband, "They'll be here in a few minutes." Fortunately, they'd both been partly deaf, even with their hearing aids, and they had whispered a bit loudly. Missie had moved fast and scampered out of the camper as the old man had tried to grab her. She'd had to leave her bag with the two changes of clothes. She wasn't bitter towards those people. They'd undoubtedly been concerned about a fourteen year-old girl out on her own, and they didn't realize that Missie knew how to take care of herself. Nor did they know how bad it was for her at home.

The banging started again, and when she peeked out, she could see two Chinese fellows wearing dirty white aprons. One of them lifted another trash barrel, letting it hit the edge of the dumpster, and her ears hurt once more. She maintained her silence and tried not to move at all until the men had disappeared, and then she counted to ten, rather rapidly, before pushing herself up and making a break for it. She made one step on her right leg and tried to take another on her left leg, but it gave out under her. She had a Charley-horse. Missie looked around and saw one of the Chinese men had stopped to have a smoke before going back in the building. He was staring at her.

Missie tried to get up and start running, and she heard him say something in Chinese. When she looked up, he was pointing at her, and two other people, one man and one woman, were poking their heads out the door and looking her way. But her leg needed time to uncramp. The three people started walking towards her, chattering away in Chinese, and suddenly she panicked, having remembered a book she'd read by one of those anonymous authors. Chelsie, her friend from Sunday School, had lent it to her; it told all about young American girls, some only six or so, who were sold on the slave market to Arab Sheiks or rich Chinese bankers in Polynesia. Two of the American children, one boy and one girl, had to go under the table while their master was eating his meals and...

The very thought made her sick, and it was hard to believe anyone could really make children do things like that, but the book had said that things like that happened all the time in those parts of the world. As the people drew near, Missie's leg suddenly recovered enough that she was able to scramble to her feet and head down the alley, running in a limping fashion. She wasn't about to let herself be kidnaped and sold to some old pervert in Calcutta or one of those other Chinese cities.

When she got to the other end of the alley, she looked back to see the three people just staring at her. One of the men looked to be a teenager, not much older than Missie, and that fellow and the woman were looking at her sympathetically, and she realized they probably wanted to help her. The older man, the one who'd first seen her, looked to be annoyed, maybe he'd had problems with people stealing from the restaurant. And, even if the other two did want to help her, she couldn't take the chance they'd call the police and she'd end up home again.

After all the movies she'd seen and all the books she'd read about running away, she knew it didn't usually work out and sometimes real bad things happened, like being sold on the slave market or ending up as a hooker. But there was always a chance, and so long as there was a chance, Missie was going to try. Even a small chance at a good life, living with people who loved her, was better than being somewhere she wasn't wanted.

When the three people turned back to enter their restaurant, Missie decided to play it safe. She'd been spotted by a policeman the day before and the fellow had run after her, calling out that he wanted to help her. Maybe, but a policeman would certainly have sent her back home, and she wasn't going to let that happen. What had surprised her was the way the policeman went past several groups of young people and headed right for her, as if she'd been wearing a sign saying:

RUNAWAY.

Maybe it was because she was alone and looking about uncertainly, but that might have been true of a lot of tourists coming to New York City. But maybe there weren't very many teenaged girls who came alone to the City just to see the Statue of Liberty and the...

Missie hated to admit it but the policeman had probably been suspicious that she'd not seemed to have anyplace to go to, and she was looking a bit

rumpled and dirty. Her mother would have been ashamed to see her, and Missie had to admit she was a bit ashamed of how she looked right then.

She began to cry at the thought of her dirtiness. And that reminded her she was all alone. For just a second, she wished she were sitting by her mother, unveiling her troubles, receiving comfort, but then she remembered how angry she was at her mother, how her mother had placed her own happiness ahead of the needs of her children—marrying another man after divorcing Daddy. Besides that, there were those times Mama had left home when she'd been angry at Missie's father.

There was no way around it—Missie knew she had to stick it out. That was what Mama herself had told her so many times: when she had wanted to quit dancing lessons, when she had wanted to give up the piano, when she had wanted to transfer out of the hard French class at school.

Missie forced herself to look around the corner of the alley and, through her tears, saw there was a delivery truck at the back entrance of some store. It was a half-block away and no people seemed to be around. With no danger behind her or in front of her, she felt herself going all flaccid and fell back against the brick wall, letting herself slide to the muddy ground, but she didn't care—her butt was already caked with that decaying garbage from behind the dumpster. Things couldn't get much worse; that much she knew for sure.

Letting her head fall, Missie cried, softly, but it was a crying that took away what strength she had left. After some time, she felt her tears drying up, though she didn't really feel any better. She looked up, shivered as a cold breeze came her way, but she saw the Sun's rays striking the building across the street. It wasn't much, but it drew her, the mere anticipation of sunlight warming her outsides and even her insides—a little.

Rising, Missie headed off towards the interior of Manhattan, or at least she thought that was where she was headed. She had been confused ever since she had fled that man the night before. That was how she'd come to be crouched behind that dumpster for so long; it wasn't just that she had been afraid the man was still around—she had not known where she was or where to go and had been afraid she'd get herself really lost or in worse trouble if she moved around in the dark.

Walking towards the rising Sun, Missie thought she recognized the area. She headed south, pretty sure she would find herself on 42nd Street, a few blocks east of the bus terminal. Exhausted, she remembered being awake much of the night, reacting to every sound, afraid of both men and rats,

but she needed to keep her wits about her. The policeman who'd tried to catch her had been near the bus terminal during the morning, and he might be there now. There might be others who would spot her. She wouldn't seem any less a runaway as she got dirtier and smellier. Self-conscious, she started to reach for the garbage that was plastered on her behind, but held back her hand, figuring it would do no good to get it all over herself.

And she was starting to feel itchy on her behind, as if the filthy goop was seeping through her thin pants. Reminded of how ill-prepared she'd been for a cold October in New York City, she pulled her pink windbreaker about her a little more tightly. Missie was thinking how much better she could feel if she could just wash her hair, but then her stomach started growling, and she remembered that she'd had nothing the day before except for a half a turkey sandwich that a really sweet Black lady had given her. The woman had talked like a church worker or something. She'd tried to talk Missie into going to someplace called Covenant House, but Missie wasn't going to go to any place where they would send her back home. It was bad enough that her brothers had to stay there, but they were only seven and nine, and there was no way they could take care of themselves if they left home. Jeff and Dan were tough little guys, but they simply weren't mature enough to take care of themselves out on their own.

Missie was on 42nd Street when she felt her will-power break down again—she was ready to admit to herself she missed her mother as well as her brothers. And Paul wasn't even that bad. He treated the three of them well, and they had a better house than they'd had before. He must have made more money than her real father had made, but it had become clear he was mostly interested in having a good time with Missie's mother; Missie and her brothers were in the way, so far as she could tell.

Her cousin TK, who was in college in Louisville, had been down for a visit and had told Missie that her father was living with some woman that TK called a bimbo. Missie didn't like that. Her father could do better; he could get himself a nice woman, someone who would provide a good home for him and for Missie. But, if he was in love with that bimbo, Missie could accept it; she even looked forward to meeting the woman at Christmas. If that was going to be possible. She wouldn't want to get her father in trouble by showing up at his house if she was an outlaw.

Missie crossed over 42nd Street, seeing that she could walk in the sunlight on the south sidewalk. It would be a lot warmer. She'd barely stepped up the curb when a woman walked her way and then moved to the left to

avoid Missie. She'd wrinkled her nose. At least, Missie was pretty sure she'd wrinkled her nose. And then when Missie reached the middle of the sidewalk, a middle-aged couple moved towards the street so they would not come too close to her. And then a man came along wearing a business suit; he looked a lot like her father, even having freckles on the bald spot on the top of his head, but he walked well over to the side of her as well, acting as if he hadn't seen her at all, but she'd caught him looking at her out of the sides of her eyes. He had almost looked as if he'd wanted to do something, but...

Had she frightened him somehow? Or maybe he had done something to feel guilty around young women, not paying enough attention to his own daughter or something like that. Missie realized with a start that, for the first time, she'd thought of her self as a young woman and not just as a teenaged girl. That made her feel good, as bad as she was feeling at the time, but it also made her feel more frightened and more lonely and more vulnerable.

She thought again about contacting Aunt Rachel. If the people at Covenant House would let her do that and not let her mother and step-father know where she was...

No, it'd be just like the time she'd run away right after her mother had married Paul. The police had found her in the bus terminal in Montgomery where her father lived, but later her cousins, TK and Bliss, had told her the police had come to their house in Memphis as well. Bliss had said her mother told them to go to hell, but they came back a short while later with a court order and searched the house anyway. Then, they'd gotten word halfway through the search that Missie had been found in that bus-station when she was only a taxi ride away from her father's house.

Missie remembered all the reasons she'd had for getting away from her mother and Paul, even if that had meant leaving Jeff and Dan as well. But her insides, her stomach as well as her brain, were in turmoil, confusion reigned, as she began to fear that her escape wasn't working out like she had hoped when she'd sneaked out of Paul's house at four on a Saturday morning, and she'd made sure it was a day when neither her mother nor Paul had an early golf date. She'd known as she shut off the alarms and went quietly out the patio door that she had to get away, and she still thought that was true, though she was having her doubts. Even then, when she'd been so confident she could make everything work out, she hadn't wanted to get anyone else in trouble. Certainly not Aunt Rachel and TK and Bliss.

From the beginning, Missie had wanted to take all the responsibility on her own shoulders, and she was going to work hard to make a place for herself in the world. She had set her immediate goals to a modest level, figuring she could just live on her own, get a job that would pay enough to get a nice apartment and to buy herself food and clothes. It wouldn't be so bad to live a bit poor for a while. She didn't really need a full-sized stereo—a boom-box would be good enough, and she could make do with a small television set. It had been nice when she'd gone out clothes shopping with her mother every Sunday, but Missie thought she could be happy with just a few nice sets of clothes each season. She was willing to live in poverty for a while to gain her independence from an unbearable situation.

Just at that moment, feeling cold and dirty and hungry, she decided she was willing to set her goals to a still more modest level. She would have been happy if she could have found a warm place, a shelter against the cold air of this huge city. And then maybe get a single good meal, just a hamburger and a nice salad would have been wonderful, even without a milkshake. She walked east on 42nd Street, hoping that she would find that warm place and that it would not be filled with too many respectable people with sensitive eyes and moral noses. And she was hoping she would find another kind soul like that Black lady who'd given her a half-sandwich the day before. Missie had been pretty sure the woman would have given her the entire sandwich if she had not already started eating that first half.

10 Skulls Are Not Thick Enough

A man in a magenta jacket walked towards the bus station at the end of 42nd Street, wondering if men could even remain human in any higher sense if they continued to show so little concern about their own insides.

That revolutionary leader in *Dr Zhivago* had been right: the personal was dead, but he had been wrong in thinking it would be the Bolsheviks or any other leftists who could kill the personal, destroying what was once called morality. It had taken not a socialistic political revolution but rather the revolution in marketing and production, leading to American material prosperity, and then to a society which drew people from the private life and the human-scale public life. The most brutal and most competent dictators of the twentieth century had not been able to force men to leave their families behind to enter the brave new world, but businessmen seeking mundane profits had found ways to entice men into the public square, not to conduct their business, but to live their lives. Women and children lived private lives for decades more, protected by Victorian-Age Daddie who went into the big, bad world to earn a living, but that was an unstable situation. Women, and even children, were now being herded into the public square, blank expressions upon their faces showing clearly the emptiness inside their skulls.

The private life was dead and the future promised little to those who valued freedom and the integrity of the individual over material prosperity. The Industrial Age would produce no Pilgrims sacrificing much to establish what they hoped to be a better world for their children and grandchildren; the Industrial

Age was that which would take the heritage of the Pilgrims and liquidate it into profits to be paid out to shareholders over the next four or five quarters. And then the party would come to an end.

* * * * *

Bayard Raines came to himself with a start, finding himself in front of a musical recording store. Having drifted away from popular culture for less than a decade, Bayard was surprised that he didn't recognize a single band or singer in the displays. His mother's attic still held his copies of recordings of Buddy Holly and Bob Dylan, John Coltrane and Chick Corea. Those performers were missing from the window. The respectable and decent works were as ephemeral as the trash!

With a sigh, he turned from the window display of so much teenaged wisdom allied to a primitive and undisciplined style of music. A pink blur passed by and then came to a complete stop no more than ten feet away from him. It was a teenaged girl sporting a big grease spot on her pretty little butt. Bayard Raines moved towards her and caught a faint whiff of garbage which he assumed to be coming from that grease spot.

As if detecting his disgust at such a smell on a human being, a teenaged girl at that, she turned and looked directly at Bayard Raines who was now no more than three feet from her. She was a bit to the plainish side of pretty, but quite attractive for all that, and quite well-developed for her years if she were as young as she seemed. Bayard tried to calm down his thoughts and his desires, but she must have detected the depraved images and thoughts which had been pushed inside of him as he had willingly sat in movie theaters or in front of the television set. She passed him a single glance which convicted him of having absorbed the ideas and feelings which put innocent young women into such danger. Bayard smiled feebly as if to apologize, but she must have misinterpreted the smile because a look of fear came into her eyes and then spread across her face. She turned from him and made her way through the crowd at a slow trot.

Something about that look of fear drew him on, not that he liked being feared, but rather that he wanted to explain that he intended her no harm and would help her in any way possible. As he set off in pursuit of her, an image came to his mind of that creature he'd seen the previous night, desperate for drugs and willing to submit to the most perverse activities in

order to get her fix. Bayard Raines brushed against a distinguished looking lady in a gray wool coat, that gray-haired lady looked to be furious at the contact. Walking away from that citadel of decency, he wondered if his memories of the night before had brought out an expression which the woman had found to be immoral or insulting.

Had he shown lust and disgust at the same time? Had he somehow taken upon himself the appearance or manner of a sexual predator?

Bayard Raines cast his eyes about even as he followed the teenaged girl down the street; it took him only a few seconds to spot a fellow who was surely a pimp. A white leather hat with a feathery white plume graced his head, as a blue leather trench-coat graced his body. As Bayard Raines moved faster through the crowd, keeping pace with the girl, he noticed some thugs in leather coats with fancy painted designs. A gang. And then he passed by two middle-aged men who were drinking out of cans in paper bags while eying all the youngsters in the crowd.

The girl was almost in a dead run, but suddenly she stopped and looked back at her well-intentioned pursuer. Her eyes then flickered wildly before she darted out into traffic. A taxi came screeching to a halt, and then she was across the other lane where a large blue Buick also came to a violent stop. The girl was safely on the other side of the street, but she didn't seem to feel safe yet. After turning around a couple of times, she shot up the stairs between the two stone lions that guarded the entrance to the public library.

By that time, Bayard Raines was at the next intersection and able to see the girl only because of her pink jacket. For the first time, he realized she was dressed as if for a cool summer day, not for October in New York City. With her dirty, out-of-season clothes and her need for a shower, she was surely a runaway. As he walked across the street, he shook his head, saddened by the knowledge of how little the people of this city, of the entire United States, cared for the lost and frightened children in their midst.

Bayard began to mount the stairs from the street to the sidewalk leading to the true entrance of the main building of the New York Public Library. There was that area at the top of the stairs, buffering the repository of cultural works from the rapid to-and-fro of 42nd Street. And there were stone lions at the top of that first set of stairs, guarding. . .

Something that Bayard couldn't quite name at that moment. He stopped and ran his hands down the back of the stone lion to his right, as if he were petting a real beast. And why not? Were they not made of the same stuff as

was he? The waste products of exploding stars? Were not those exploding stars the common source of all materials but hydrogen and helium? Bayard Raines was still petting the stone lions when the pink jacket, which had remained frozen for a while, moved once more to pass through the doorway to the library.

When he saw her enter a place of danger and promise, he moved forward, walking towards those doors, unsure what he might find inside, but he was fearing the tales that young girl might bear as much as he feared the tales borne by Homer and Dante, Dickens and Dostoevsky.

11 The Moral Obligation to Be a Toy

Mary was wandering over a small space in front of the display of new novels, not really impressed by what she saw, but also not really sure what would impress her. It had gotten so easy to turn on the television set when she got home; she really hadn't been doing much serious reading even when she wasn't working a lot of overtime. She wasn't really even reading any decent pieces of mind-candy, like the old-fashioned mysteries her grandfather had devoured, in between his main courses of thick, heavy books on topics like building bridges or sending men to the moon. Mary smiled but the cheerful mood passed as quickly as it had come. A darker mood came once more over her and she asked herself:

What is the moral objection to television? That it dumbs people down? That it isolates them in their houses? Reading certainly isolates people and it seems just as capable of dumbing people down.

She shook such a depressing thought out of her head and looked back to the rack of newly published books. She saw a novel entitled *Handshake*; it sounded familiar, and the jacket description proved it to be a re-issue of a novel written by an astronomer; it concerned a first contact with an advanced alien civilization. Mary quickly put the book back on the shelf. She had enough science fiction in the one or two children's movies she watched each year—some of which were disconcertingly popular with American adults. And she'd had more than enough of self-righteous scientists criticizing politicians and theologians and moral leaders when the scientific communities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries had shown them-

selves quite willing to develop all those weapons and all that technology that was said to be damaging the earth.

Realizing she was in a nasty mood, Mary Pride moved a few feet down the display of new books, hoping to find something to break her out of that dark mood.

Her eyes passed over the cover of an adventure novel by Guy Guyon and then returned. She remembered her father had read a couple of Guyon's early books, though she could never understand why men read all those violent novels about mercenaries or even soldiers in a legitimate war. Those things were horrible enough when they happened; why keep the personal memories alive? Since those sorts of novels and memoirs had never done much to stop an irrational glorification of war, why not just keep the historical records and let individual suffering and misery. . .

Admitting to herself that there were good arguments on all sides of such an issue, Mary returned her attention to the book with the odd title of *The Bear Rises from the Grave*. Odd the title was, but not in a way that interested or amused her. The cover picture was no better with its overly-muscled blonde beast, half his clothes torn or burned away; and he was standing over a small pile of three or four dead men in grayish uniforms. Despite the disgusting cover art, and despite her lack of interest in any adventure novels, unless they involved dogs and blizzards, Mary's curiosity had been piqued. She opened the novel and read:

The copter rose into the air. Colonel Vishinsky's bald and ugly head grinned out the window. It looked like a skull. It didn't look like the head of a living man. The evil Colonel was happy because he had left Nate Lofgren in the middle of the Sahara. Nate had no food and no water. He didn't even have a gun.

It was evil and cruel to leave Nate in that situation. Only a twisted little man would do it. He was envious of Nate who was six, three and 200 pounds of lean muscle. Colonel Vishinsky had hated tall and handsome Nate for years. This was not the first time he had tried to kill Nate. The Colonel was sure he had succeeded this time. Nate wasn't so sure. He'd gotten out of worse fixes. He would survive and tell the world what he knew. Nate would have a special message for Colonel Vishinsky the next time they met.

The KGB was rising from the grave. Soon the Soviet Union would rise as well. Someone needed to stop Vishinsky and his evil comrades. Nate was the man for the job. He would do that job.

Mary closed the book, still not sure why so many men would read such stuff. It did seem as if it was written by, and probably for, men who didn't deal well with commas and subordinate clauses, but so far as she could remember her father had been a good reader. When Mary was a little girl, he'd been especially fond of historical novels and biographies dealing with the period of the American Revolution. He'd had a complete collection of Kenneth Roberts novels, as well as Page Smith's biography of John Adams and multi-volume biographies of Washington and Jefferson. At one time he'd joked about writing an everyman's guide to the dramatic differences in belief amongst the several major groups of men usually labelled as the 'Founding Fathers'. And, then, by the time Mary's mom was losing her mind, her father was mostly watching television and reading the modern sorts of adventure novels, not Jack London but Guy Guyon and his ilk.

Mary's eyes settled upon the spine of the latest novel by Emmanuelle Chiant. . . It was entitled *From Birmingham to Bandung*. She pulled it out and read the book-cover to find it was about a woman searching desperately for her missing daughter in the slave-markets of southeast Asia. Not sure why anyone would start looking for a runaway American girl in the slave-markets of southeast Asia, Mary figured the book was filled with scenes appealing to people who liked to look from safety upon the events of a perverse and cruel world. There were probably heaving bosoms and bulging shoulder muscles and gasps after the evil sultan pulled the clothes from the body of innocent little Susie from a nice home in Birmingham.

Down the street in the district where windows were blacked out and fast-talking men tried to entice tourists into smelly little book and video shops, one could certainly buy the books that would fill in the gaps in the story, books that would tell what that evil and perverse Sultan did to poor little Susie before she could be rescued. And it was likely they would depict poor little Susie as loving every bit of the degradation and pain. Maybe those told the same story as many books stocked in public libraries across the country; the obscene books were different in carrying the stories through to logical ends.

The idea of violent sex brought back an image of that drug-hungry whore with the body of a thirteen year-old. Mary felt her intestines convulse, and she stepped back without checking behind her, colliding with someone who tried to push lightly on through. It didn't take much effort for Mary to hold her ground. She wasn't about to give ground before one of these rude New Yorkers, especially when she was so irritable after a weird evening and a sleepless night. She turned and saw a girl of fourteen or so trying to squirm by without meeting Mary's eyes, but Mary could see enough of the girl's eyes to see they were as large as you'd expect from a five foot, two inch doll. Girls of that age were typically blessed with those gorgeous, on-drawing eyes, but this one seemed to have eyes larger than normal for a teenaged girl. Fear?

Caught in a mood somewhere between anger and a guilt-ridden concern, Mary grabbed hold of the girl long enough to feel that she had on no more than a light shirt beneath her pink windbreaker. And the girl, who smelled just a little bit, pulled away from Mary without ever looking directly at her. As she walked fast towards an exit, she turned and looked back in fear. Mary looked in that direction and saw the curly-haired man in the magenta L.L. Bean jacket. The girl seemed deathly afraid of the man, though he looked confused and even sympathetic and not very beastly. Was he the girl's father? Or someone else come to bring the girl home? He looked to be biologically old enough to be the girl's father, but only if he'd started his fathering in his mid-teens. . .

There was no further time to speculate. The girl was on the move and Mary headed after her as she disappeared through a doorway leading more deeply into the library.

Mary was getting pretty curious about that mysterious fellow in the magenta jacket. If he had come to look for a missing girl, it might make sense he would have been walking the streets at night, looking for a girl forced to earn her keep the wrong way. And maybe that girl was afraid of him because. . .

It wasn't clear to Mary why the girl was so scared of the fellow, especially if she did know him and if he had a legitimate reason to be looking for her, but all such thoughts were pushed away as Mary found herself rushing through the library in pursuit of the poor, tormented girl. Of course, she was feeling guilty about being another source of torment, though she just wanted to help the girl. As for the mysterious fellow? Mary wondered what role he was playing. Maybe he wasn't a good guy; maybe he was

that junkie's pimp and he might be out recruiting more runaways to be entrapped in a life of sexual slavery by way of drugs and forced perversions that would make the poor girl feel so degraded she'd think she could never again be fit for decent society.

The young woman led her pursuer through the magazine room of the library, through some other reading rooms, down corridors and then, finally, through the lobby and out the front door. Less than a minute later, she was on the public sidewalk with Mary starting to gain. After a short sprint, Mary was able to get her hand on the girl's shoulder but found that her entire arm was shaking. Mary's mind was filled with images of the encounter with the prostitute the night before, filled with un verbalized fears that that prostitute had begun her fall as a runaway child.

The girl turned and seemed ready to do what was necessary to escape, but then she froze and stared at the expression on Mary's face as if she were the one deserving sympathy. Afraid what might be showing, Mary decided to plow ahead with helping the girl.

"Excuse me. . ." She was barely able to gasp out the words after running through the library—she'd been slacking off a bit on her visits to the gym these past few weeks. "I mean you no harm. I was chasing you to see if you were all right. . ." It was the girl's turn to wrinkle up her face, and Mary spoke soothingly, "I mean you look like you need a place to stay and a meal and. . ."

As the girl collapsed crying in her arms, Mary looked around, not seeing the the man in the magenta jacket and wondering where he had gone to.

12 Leaving Behind a Cultural Warehouse

When Bayard Raines returned to the sidewalk leading to the library, he found the last guardians of western reason and decency were still on the job, but his thoughts were on that woman. With all the people in New York City, how could he have run into that woman twice in two days? One encounter had ended with the woman and her date being propositioned by that poor, addicted hooker, and the second encounter had ended with the woman meeting a runaway possibly on her way to the same sad state.

Staring into the sky as he sucked in cold wind, Bayard Rains realized he had really messed up. Suppose the woman was not what she seemed to be by her nice clothes and her gentle bearing. Suppose that encounter with the streetwalker had been more to the woman's taste than a quiet day at the library. Maybe she regularly visited the library to troll for runaways. A large public building was a good place to head if you were a runaway on the New York City streets in October. And the girl hadn't been dressed even for daytime temperatures this time of year. Bayard figured she'd either left a house in a warm part of the country or else had left a more northern home so fast that she'd grabbed only a jacket more appropriate for a breezy day in early September. As far as he could tell, that poor girl was giving out signs that she was a ready-made victim, a teenager with many of the physical assets of a woman and a teenager in a position to be exploited.

Kicking the stonewall twice, and it hurt the second time, Bayard realized the woman might well be taking that poor, lost creature home to teach her God-knows-what tricks of sexual submission and degradation. Or maybe she was going to let that rich boyfriend of hers have his way with the girl. . .

And she couldn't have been more than fifteen!

Ignoring the pain in his foot, Bayard Raines turned back and headed

after the woman and the girl. He walked as fast as he could without drawing too much attention. A few minutes later, he saw a pink blotch descending into the west-side subway. He following, remaining at a discreet distance. They only rode the train to one station north of Lincoln Square; Bayard barely got off in time as the train-doors were closing. He'd not taken a step when he realized his jacket was likely familiar to the woman. Not wishing to be noticed by her, he pulled it off and folded it over his arm. A few people stared at him as he walked into the coolish air in his thin T-shirt and carrying his jacket over his arm. He did his best to ignore those people.

A man who'd wanted to help save civilization was having strong doubts about the health of his own mind and his own soul, but he also felt a moral obligation to find out where that poor runaway girl was being taken. And so it was that for a couple of minutes, he followed the woman and the girl as they walked east towards Central Park, but the woman stopped a third of a block short of the park. She led the younger woman up the stairs to one of the large townhouses now split into small apartments. After she had put the key in the lock, but before turning it, the woman looked in Bayard Raines' direction as if she sensed his presence. Not knowing if she would have considered him a protector or a predator or an enemy to her predatory plans, he moved along with the flow of foot-traffic across the street from her apartment building. He was sure he didn't stand out in the crowd, but, out of the corner of his eyes, he could see she was suspicious, probably afraid she'd been followed. Maybe she was afraid the police or the social-workers had seen her meet the runaway and then take her home rather than taking her to a public agency. She might have been suspicious just because someone saw her lead the poor child off to a life of sin and degradation.

But then an image came to him of the woman when she was sitting in the coffee-shop the night before. She'd seemed like a classy lady, just the sort he'd dreamed of meeting one day. Before, that is, he had chosen to devote his life to his task of examining American society from the outside. Dispassionate, uninvolved.

13 An Endangered Benefactor

While Missie was showering, Mary sat with glazed eyes in front of a televised weather forecast of the impending winter weather. Storms were coming soon; high pressure regions were weakening and moving off-shore; cyclones were about to form and move north bearing the waters of the Caribbean. Chaotic motion was all about and Mary knew not what to do, knew not where to head for shelter for herself or that poor girl. Missie needed help but she had threatened to run away again if Mary contacted either the police or Missie's mother in Birmingham.

“Why the hell does life have to move towards the huge public squares, the centers of power and money? That was one of the good things about my childhood. I lived in a small town in New England and what happened beyond our boundaries was interesting and important and men went off to war sometimes and we were hurt by problems on Wall Street, but my life was human-sized and I don't think it was just because I was a child.”

Before she had a chance to think her thoughts through to a conclusion, Mary saw a scene developing in her mind. . .

She was a little girl again, sitting on the swinging chair on the front porch of the duplex shared by her parents and her grandparents, with little Mary the one who lived most fully throughout the entire house. The day was warm and bright. The French-Canadian Catholic church across the church towered towards the sky. A pretty brick church with the priest's house on one side, the convent and elementary school on the other side.

Mary thought her own church was also pretty. Wooden siding painted white. A glass and metal addition going off to the side. No rectory or school, but the main building was all wood, inside and out. She was thinking about wandering down to that

church to make a comparison to the brick Catholic church when she heard the door open and turned to see her father dressed in his khaki pants and his corporate green tennis shirt. With a happy smile and a blank look in his eyes, he headed off to work, driving towards the hardware emporium as big as an airplane hanger.

“But that’s not right. I was away in college when Dad sold the store and went to work for a corporate hardware store.” She returned her attention momentarily to the television screen to see the forecast of good weather for the next few days. Warm sunny days in October, though the night-time temperatures would be dipping into the thirties. Summer was giving the area a parting gift before it retreated completely.

Life wasn’t so bad.

Maybe a lot of the people with businesses near Baxton would be able to get good jobs eventually with CMBG or some other corporation. That would relieve them of the struggle to accumulate retirement funds, the struggle to turn a profit year-to-year. Sometimes things got bad enough that small business-people had to worry about getting enough cash flow each week to put off bankruptcy. And the small businessman had to always be prepared to get a call in the middle of the night: the police might be calling about a break-in, the firemen about a fire or a gas-pipe leak.

While working on her MBA, after her father had sold the store, Mary had become sensitive to the troubles of the businessmen in her home-town. There had been those struggling to survive, those with thriving businesses threatening to crash because of a need to finance growth. There had been those who had discovered their children were not interested in taking over the business founded by grandpa; they were heading for that first rung on the corporate ladder, everyone of them.

And it came to Mary, not for the first time, that her father might have sold the store to protect her. To force her way from a tough life of running that family hardware store. She’d never asked him; he’d always said the business had been doing okay at the time he’d sold but he was projecting great problems just a few years down the road. If that had been true, it had been a smart move to sell before he had to negotiate under pressure.

“But was he lying to protect me?”

And then she wondered why she was rehashing problems which were fading into the dimness of history. Jake’s comments at the meeting on

Baxton had irritated her to do just that. And now Missie. . .

What was the connection between a runaway child and the destruction of her father's business by corporate expansion?

Maybe there was no connection? Not all social problems were necessarily linked. At least not directly. It was even quite likely that the existence of the modern corporation had helped make life safer and more comfortable for the vast majority of children; no system could ensure the safety or the humaneness of the environment of all children—even the children of powerful kings had often suffered and sometimes at the hands of their own fathers. Maybe it wasn't such a bad bargain to give up some freedom, to fit yourself into a corporate hierarchy, turn yourself into a corporate widget, in return for a comfortable life, lots of toys, and a chance to enjoy a week or two at the Florida seashore once a year.

Mary sighed before admitting to herself that one of the freedoms taken away from people was that of caring for minors in ways not approved of by the social service bureaucracies and the higher-level agencies and legislatures which they served. By sheltering Missie, Mary was breaking the law.

But what was to be done?

Missie would run away if Mary tried to go to the authorities, but, if she didn't, Mary could be in big trouble with governments that could do little to help the Missies of the world, but they. . .

Did the governments want a monopoly on helping people, the same way that corporations wanted as much market-share as possible?

As her thoughts scattered further, she remembered something she'd heard back in her days at Smith College. Duane, a shaggy-haired radical of a political science major at Amherst College, had told her: "The power to do things **for** people is the power to do things **to** people," though Mary could not remember who he'd been quoting. Maybe he hadn't even told her who it was who'd said that, though she was positive he'd been quoting someone.

Duane. Shaggy-haired and somewhat shaggy-minded, though his thoughts had been powerful in their vague forms. And he had been just a teenager at the time, a freshman at Amherst while she had been a junior at Smith. He'd called himself a Libertarian, "with a capital 'L'," whatever he'd meant by that, but he'd surprised her by going on to base almost all of his arguments

on humane foundations—mostly advocating the freedom that allowed individuals to become what they would. Duane had told Mary something she'd thought about once or twice over the years since she'd entered the corporate life: "The welfare systems, the social security system, all these health and social insurance systems, exist to make life safe for the large corporations so they can go on serving the needs of a bloated and imperialistic government."

"Well," Mary told herself, "Duane had been a little extreme in his statements, but sometimes an extreme statement is necessary to cut through all the crap and to clearly make a point." And then she told herself, "He had been a very gentle and sweet young man." Too gentle? Would she have fallen for a younger man if he'd made a strong play for her? At that age, two years often made a big difference.

The water stopped running and Mary heard the shower curtains rustle. A minute later, the bathroom door opened. Then several minutes passed without sound, and Mary rose and went into the second bedroom to check on Missie and found her curled up, sound asleep and wrapped up in Mary's oversized, sky-blue terry-cloth robe. The poor girl hadn't even bothered to pull down the quilt.

* * * * *

Missie walked into the living-room, a bath-towel draped around her waist, another draped over her shoulders so that her breasts were barely covered. Mary looked up, not quite sure what to make of the young woman's casualness in an apartment where she was only a short-term guest and barely knew the hostess.

"This isn't a locker-room, young lady. My life has been quiet lately, but you should have expected the possibility that someone else, maybe a man, would be in here."

"I'm showing less of my self than I do at the beach or pool." Missie walked across the room, her head held high, as if to show Mary she'd spoken her mind and that was that. Not sure whether she should be angry or amused, Mary just watched as the teenager took a seat on the chair facing the love-seat which served as couch in the small living-room. "I'm not going to call my mother. Because if I do, she'll have the call traced and send the police to pick me up."

"What made you think I was going to ask you to do any such thing?"

“For one thing, you already asked me three times this morning. Once on our way to your apartment, once while you were getting me a sandwich and a glass of milk, and once when you were showing me where you kept your linens.” Missie started to pull up the towel covering her young breasts but then she looked over at Mary and stopped.

The older woman, and she immediately asked herself silently: “When did I become such?”, found herself shocked. She’d certainly seen other women naked before, but she’d always assumed that girls became modest, even in front of other women, about the time their breasts started budding. It had been that way with her and with all the young women of her generation that she’d known. Even in the locker-rooms at college, Mary had always kept herself covered in front of other women. Had things changed this much that young women were as casual about displaying their naked bodies as young men were said to be when walking about locker-rooms?

“So,” asked Mary in a quiet voice, “are you going to call your mother? Or at least your aunt or your cousin?”

Missie sat silent for a couple of moments before pronouncing, “No,” and then she stood and left the room in a rush as if she were afraid her mind could be changed.

That made Mary feel a little bit—not quite better—but more hopeful that Missie would do the right thing before too many days passed.

14 More Illusions Are Punctured

After seeing the two women enter the building, Bayard had set out towards the southern regions of New York City, taking the subway down to the New York University stop. From there, he set out on a slow walk to *The Strand*, a bookstore which he'd heard about. Large selection, and supposedly not oriented towards the bestsellers, though any large bookstore would probably have to make some concessions to a corrupted market-place.

And he roamed restlessly about the store, checking out the musical section though he was neither an instrumentalist, beyond playing some simple tunes on the piano and guitar, nor had he so much as sung in a choral group since he left the church choir after seventh grade. Tempted to buy a Grove's encyclopedia and then more tempted to buy one of several displayed introductions to musical theory, Bayard left the music section with empty hands and a mind partly cleared of the image of that woman.

No, it was like one of those dumb Zen koans. As soon as he let himself be aware that his mind was cleared, it wasn't.

And he wandered over to the philosophy section. Besides the standard Plato and Aristotle, there was a serving of Nietzsche and Nozick and Foucault. There was somebody named Passmore and a fellow named Copleston had written a multi-volume history of philosophy. Nagel and, or course, Russell. The book Bayard had already read on existentialism: *The Irrational Man* by Barrett.

Bayard left without lifting a book off its shelf. He was beginning to feel intimidated by all that a well-educated man was supposed to know. There were men, and women, who had in fact acquired a vast amount of knowledge. In some it had perhaps turned to wisdom and in others. . .

He felt ignorant. He often felt angry at American society for not en-

couraging young people to develop their minds or souls, but each person was a moral creature from a young age. He knew that he had failed in some moral duty to have developed his intelligence, his creativity, his. . .

What were the moral virtues which were missing as fully as the intellectual virtues?

Feeling empty inside of himself, wondering how he might have ever hoped to interest a classy woman like the one he'd seen. . .

Bayard had given up his only career, however modest the rewards might be for a teacher.

He was beginning to feel he had not the courage or the intensity to do the sort of work he'd set his heart and mind upon.

However poorly developed were that heart and mind. . .

Part III

Unexpected Approaches

15 Worse Than the Vandals or Mongols

Jake's stomach sank at the sight of the wasteland which had once been the World Trade Center towers. The Twin Towers.

Three thousand lives lost, all innocent by the rules of war, killed by brutal criminal men who imagined themselves to be in some sort of holy war.

Immense damage done to the economy which fed so many, provided housing and clothing and medical care for so many, including tens of millions of impoverished people. Not all of those many, impoverished or otherwise, were residents or citizens of the United States.

"Evil," spouted forth from Jake's mouth, to his mild embarrassment, but he looked around to see several nearby people nodding their heads in agreement; a pretty little brunette woman near thirty looked over to smile sadly at him. And then she pulled back from the small crowd and walked over to Jake, touching him very lightly on the side of his upper-arm and telling him, "It does no good to get too upset. This is a long-term problem and we just have to buckle down and get ready to fight a long-term war."

Jake looked into the woman's eyes for just a moment before he backed away and then turned to walk to a nearby sidewalk. The woman followed him and he turned to look at her as she stood, once again looking back towards the giant hole in the ground. Her hair was cut as short as a man's hair but was layered in a feminine way. Her features were attractive in a regular way; her eyes shone with an active intelligence. Her mouth was set in a firm but not grim manner. She was dressed in a blue jogging suit very similar to the gray suit that Jake had put on for his pilgrimage down to this site he'd been avoiding. . .

"This is the first time I've been down here since. . . *it* happened." She'd

visibly shuddered and Jake asked, "Did you know some people who were in there?"

She nodded her head and her eyes watered a little. Jake felt an urge to put his arm around her and draw her into a hug, but he merely suggested, "Why don't we go someplace where we can have a coffee and relax a little?"

And she nodded again, but then she held him in place with just a gentle touch of her finger upon his elbow. "My name is Kirsten, Jake. Kirsten Kirby." Jake reddened at the suspicion that he should know who she was, but Kirsten laughed a little through her expression of sadness. "I'm a friend of Sally Dumont, and I happened to see you with her once when you were dating."

Jake reddened some more at the memory of Sally though he didn't think he had anything to be embarrassed about. They'd dated a number of times the first year he'd been in New York City and then she'd gone out of town for a few months to audit the computer operations of the insurance brokerage firm where she worked. Over those months, they'd remained in telephone contact and had seen each other twice, once in Boston when they were there at the same time and once in New York City, but they'd never started dating again when Sally got back to the City for keeps.

"How is Sally?"

"All right, I guess. I haven't seen her in a little while. I've been busy at work with some mergers and acquisitions."

Jake turned back to the hole not so far away as he would have liked and felt a fresh wave of disgust, and maybe a little bit of fear, pass over him. He thought he managed to hide his unsettled feelings as he told her, "Kirsten Kirby. That's a nice name."

"When I was young, other children did terrible things with it."

Immediately as he had spoken, Jake had been upset with himself. It seemed sacrilegious to have spoken mere chit-chat when he was near a site which had recently seen a great amount of human suffering. But Kirsten seemed to be exquisitely self-controlled and he turned to offer his arm to her. She took his arm and away they walked, a woman still looking the part of a mourner and a man who looked solemn as his thoughts returned to dwell upon the debased nature of people so evil as to mount such an attack upon a civilian target.

Kirsten and Jake spoke not a word as they walked along the sidewalk. The further they moved from the disaster site, the more Jake's insides seemed to relax and they'd gone nearly a block when Jake felt comfortable

enough to ask, “Do you work with Sally?”

“Certainly not. I’m a liberal arts grad and a lawyer, not a computer scientist. At my firm, they won’t even let me change the paper in the printer because I’ve broken too many. I’m a junior partner at Callahan, Kirby & Lewis.” After a pause, as if to let him think about the name, she confirmed, “The Kirby in the firm’s name was my great-grandfather, who was one of the founders of the firm just before World War I.”

“The acquisition and merger specialists?”

“We do nearly any sort of work involving investment banking or stock companies. That had been the insight of great-grandpa—publicly held corporations were going to be increasingly important in the United States. He was certainly on target.”

Jake felt suspicions coming to life in his mind. True enough, he was involved in the Baxton deal, but he quickly dismissed that; no more than a billion dollars was involved, not enough to draw any conspiratorial attention from a major Wall Street law firm. What was more disturbing was the conclusions he’d recently drawn in a report which had been marked for very limited distribution: CMBG was a potential acquisition target because of significant unrealized values that had been building up during a recent binge of acquisitions of companies with a lot of underutilized assets.

“A penny for your thoughts, Jake.” He looked over to see she was offering him a shiny new penny.

“I was just thinking how pretty you are when you smile and your eyes start sparkling.”

Kirsten smiled but her gaze seemed a bit piercing to Jake. He couldn’t push away his suspicions, however much he saw her as a wonderful woman. Smart. Accomplished. Very nice-looking.

Without another word, they walked on for another half-block and came to a diner where Jake would often grab a quick meal when he was downtown during the week. A minute later, they were seated at a Formica-topped table. It was a small place, simple and with simple but tasty food, and convenient to Wall Street. On weekdays, it was often filled with well-dressed men and women. On that quiet Saturday morning, it was empty but for Jake and Kirsten, and the man who stood behind the counter. He was a Greek immigrant and Jake was drawing a blank on his name as the two men exchanged polite nods of recognition. After a quick look at his wristwatch, Jake said, “It’s only 9:30. Are you up for a little breakfast or do you want just coffee?”

“A croissant and a slice of cantaloupe would be nice.” Jake waved to the waiter, but he was just greeting a policeman who had walked in. A moment later, that policeman walked out with a Styrofoam cup filled with hot coffee. When the waiter had disappeared—presumably to fetch his order-pad, Jake looked over at Kirsten and decided she was posing for him. Looking to her left, she was showing him her right profile, and a nice, interesting profile it was—full of character. Her features were not really regular, as he had first thought seeing her from the front, but they seemed pleasing to Jake, more expressive of character than were Barbie-doll features. Her cheeks were prominent and her nose was a bit more pointed than it had seemed from the front. She also had a bump just below the bridge of her nose as if she’d maybe been clobbered good, by a softball or by a playmate’s fist. Her eye-brows were sharply defined and not a hair was out of place. Her nails were also in perfect condition, painted light-red and showing not a scratch or a nick. Her skin had too dark a tan for Jake’s comfort—cancer was on his mind. But the effect was pleasing and contributed to the overall impression that Kirsten was an attractive, intelligent woman who took very good care of herself.

She had only posed for a moment when she turned to Jake and asked, “Did you know Sammy Baker?”

“Not well, but I . . . Was it him? I mean, down at . . . the Twin Towers?”

His voice faded off as Kirsten nodded and told him: “I first met Sally when Sammy brought her to a beach-party sleep-over. They were just friends, but I talked to her a bit after Sammy and the other boys left. It was girls only for the sleep-over. Up at my parents’ house in Westport. Sammy’s parents lived nearby in Norwalk, in one of those dreadful raised ranches.”

Jake paused a moment, thinking of the raised-ranch his parents had been so proud to buy when he was in second grade, but the waiter came over before there was any chance to protest. The highly-regarded financial executive felt a little ashamed but he did no more than to order the breakfast special with two eggs sunny-side up. True to her earlier statements, Kirsten ordered a croissant and a half a cantaloupe. The waiter said, “I’ll put in the orders and be right back with coffee.”

Jake felt his insides to be a bit turbulent. He could forgive Kirsten for insulting his parent’s taste in houses—she didn’t even know them, but he couldn’t get over his suspicions about this meeting, however authentic Kirsten’s feelings had been at the former site of the Twin Towers. It was

his knowledge of the unrealized values inside CMBG that made him most uncomfortable, most suspicious of Kirsten. For the first time, he realized in his heart of hearts that CMBG might well be someone else's opportunity. And he wondered if he himself might also be someone else's opportunity.

Suddenly did Kirsten's face tighten up and she asked, "Did you know people who were in the Towers on... that day, Jake?"

"No one I was real close to, but I knew at least a dozen people in a casual way. Either met them at mixers or private parties or maybe did some work with them on issues with the formation of GRF."

Kirsten's eye-brows rose. "Did you work on that? Weren't you new to the firm?"

"I wouldn't glorify what I did. I was an errand boy for Ev Thornsby and Ziggy Robinson."

Kirsten giggled and then sat back to allow the waiter to place the plates of food on the table. "Ziggy. The name always made me laugh. I never worked with him; I was still in college when he left investment banking to go to work for that aerospace company that CMBG bought, but he was at my grandfather's house a few times for clam-bakes."

That made Jake feel a little better; he trusted Ziggy and could talk to him about this supposedly chance meeting. But he suddenly wondered why he was so suspicious. Jake couldn't remember telling anyone he was coming down here on Saturday and he had originally planned to come in the afternoon. Besides that—very few people in CMBG had seen Jake's analyses on the hidden values in the company; so far as he knew, no one at all on the outside had been told of the opportunity that could quickly turn into a problem.

"You're withdrawing from me, Jake. You almost make me suspicious that something is up with CMBG." She was smiling at him coyly, but, knowing her background and having an idea that she had...

"Where did you go to law school?"

She cocked her head and looked at him, eyes as wide as those of a fourteen year-old girl. After studying him for a few seconds, she finally told him, "Yale. But I also started work on a JD at Oxford. Never finished my first term there. Daddie called me home to help him on a big reincorporation project."

"Amphoteric Chemicals? When they split out their genetic research division?" He was only making a wild guess but the timing would have been right, but...

She ignored his question and sat back in her chair to study him for a moment or two before returning to nibble away at her cantaloupe.

Jake returned to his breakfast, finishing it before asking her, “Were you planning to marry him?”

Kirsten’s eyes widened once more but only for an instant and then she dropped her gaze from Jake and picked up her napkin to dab at the corners of her mouth before telling him, “Sammy and I had agreed to a trial break-up of sorts. We were great together so long as we remained in the dating phase of our relationship, but we had major differences of opinions on how we would live if we got married.” Her eyes drifted away for a few seconds, as if she were examining the place where ceiling met the far wall of the restaurant. Her voice came from a distance, “I knew a number of other people who were in the Towers, including a few I was very close to. My brother’s sister-in-law, a family friend from church, a distant cousin that I used to spend a lot of time with. . . I went with her to her family’s house in Maine for a few weeks each summer. . .”

Kirsten’s voice had drifted to a still greater distance, and Jake pulled out his wallet and waved the waiter over. Handing over a few bills, Jake nodded for the fellow to keep the change. The waiter passed his eyes over Kirsten’s face and then smiled at Jake in a discreet recognition of his companion’s state of mourning.

As the waiter was walking back to the cash register, Kirsten commanded, “We’ll go back to the 9/11 site before we separate for the day.”

When they were back at the disaster site, Jake saw that a large number of people were there, some mourning and some simply looking to satisfy their curiosity. As Jake and Kirsten were walking up to the small, quiet crowd, they saw an elderly couple toss a dozen roses in the direction of the hole. They lay on the ground, still a good distance from the dangerous and deep crater. That couple turned and walked away, the man having to support the woman who was sobbing for all the world to hear. Jake dropped his eyes as the couple passed; Kirsten turned her gaze toward the crater. Jake saw Kirsten’s lips move and thought she was saying a short prayer, but he wasn’t sure. A few seconds later, she turned to leave and Jake followed at her shoulder. They had walked just a short way up the street before Kirsten stopped and turned to Jake. “I’ve decided to head up to my parent’s summer home in Westport, but I’ll have the chauffeur drop you off at your place on the way up.”

“I live. . .”

“I know where you live. Within a few blocks. I don’t need to know any better than that. For now. You can say something to the driver and he’ll drop you off right at your apartment building.”

Fifteen minutes later, Jake found himself at the door to his apartment building, his hand shaking as he was putting the key in the front door of his apartment building. He’d not stepped inside the building before he had decided he needed a long, demanding—even painful, run through Central Park.

16 Towers of Glass Shatter Too Easily

There was nothing but a deep hole. Bayard shuddered and didn't even dare to move as close to the site as the police lines would have allowed. He raised his eyes and almost imagined two great towers reaching towards the sky, not that such had ever been of great interest to him; he had decided, in his recent thoughts, that such structures were more a sign of the hubris of man, the moral and spiritual corruption of Babel brought to a greater reality than had been possible for the ancients. It was somewhat humiliating, for those who could still think, that major enemies of American society had thought it most effective to strike at a symbol of American wealth rather than a symbol of American freedom, let alone American spiritual strength. And then Bayard wondered if there were any such symbols of freedom and spiritual strength which had not become meaningless for one reason or another—often enough commercial exploitation.

Standing apart from the crowds of people—onlookers and mourners, Bayard tried to work through the puzzle. Not many years before, Robert MacNamara had written a book revealing that the Johnson administration had, obviously more than cold-bloodedly, made the decision to fight the war in Vietnam in a way that led to the deaths or serious injuries of a thousand noncombatants a week. At a thousand a week, it hadn't take many weeks to reach three thousand.

MacNamara's attempts to confess had left Bayard confused, though that effort had seemed to be honest and heart-searching. The book had also brought back memories of his discussions with Alvin, a friend of Bayard's father who had been in Vietnam as a Ranger. He had told Bayard about being sent in to villages a few times under orders that labeled those villages as Viet Cong strongholds. They had crept through gunk and muck, eating

rats and snakes to survive, and then those nineteen and twenty year-old Americans had emerged to find themselves exchanging gunfire with twelve year-old girls and ancient, shriveled men. Alvin had done a lot of thinking and had investigated matters to the point where the Army intelligence people had started to watch him. He'd concluded that he, and other American soldiers, were being sent in to make examples for the Vietnamese who didn't cooperate with the more gentle and more lucrative land-clearing efforts of the American government. For years, Bayard had put memories of those conversations in the furthest recesses of his mind, but then there had been that scandal surrounding Senator Kerry from Nebraska. When he'd been in Vietnam, the unit he'd commanded had gone in to a village deep in the jungle, the soldiers having been told to expect a fight with tough Viet Cong troops; they'd ended up exterminating a village of civilians. Bayard had concluded that the US government had used American troops to commit brutal war-crimes, had tricked those young men into murdering noncombatants.

The reluctant skeptic looked back to the holes where once had stood two citadels of great wealth and commercial power. More important had been the human beings in those towers. Janitors and electricians as well as commodities brokers and management consultants. Americans had a right to protect themselves and it was not the ones with true grievances against the United States who had taken down the tower.

He sighed and wondered if he could ever put it all together, could ever form a coherent picture of the modern world. . .

He remembered that Dostoevsky had said the trick to understanding your age was to learn the name that Satan had taken for that period and he wondered if 'obliviousness' fit the twentieth and twenty-first centuries even better than 'fanaticism' or 'racialism' or such names. Maybe even 'self-satisfied ignorance'? He couldn't decide and felt guilty at judging his own era in such brutal terms. He felt unfit to so judge the era which had produced him.

Still. . .

Three thousand people. Fathers, mothers, even grandparents.

But those thousand a week in Vietnam had included fathers and mothers and grandparents, as well as children.

Three weeks. . .

He wondered if it was possible to compare such crimes quantitatively, if evil could be measured by body counts. And then he had a horrible thought

that some people might be convinced that evil was measured by harm to the gross national product.

Bayard shuddered and then looked back towards the great holes and saw an elderly black couple crying. As he watched, the woman took a bunch of roses and tossed them in the direction of the crater. Perhaps she wasn't supposed to be doing that but...

Had they lost a friend? A child? They were old enough that they might have easily had a grandchild in the workforce.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw a young couple. A slender man, lean and hungry in his looks, and an equally slender woman, still leaner and still more hungry in her looks. Bayard saw they were in coordinated running suits, the man's was gray and the woman's was blue. They looked as if they had coordinated their clothing for...

Bayard's head shot around. No longer looking out of the corner of his eyes, he was staring, in an impolite way, at the man, thinking him to be the one who'd been in Greenwich Village the night before with that much more attractive woman; she'd been much softer looking than this one. He was still trying to decide if the man was the one who'd been down in Greenwich Village when he caught more movement at the edge of his vision. Bayard turned to see the elderly black couple moving off, the man supporting the woman who was ready to break down in sorrow. For a minute or so, Bayard stood and watched that couple move away.

And then they had moved out of Bayard's range of attention and he turned back towards the younger couple to see them also walking away. They stopped and a limo pulled up almost immediately. The long black Caddie pulled away from the curb and soon disappeared around a corner. Bayard was confused.

17 Feelings Pleasurable and Uncomfortable

Five minutes after he had been let off by Kirsten's chauffeur, Jake was on the front steps of his apartment building, looking into a sunny and warm day in October. He felt only a little chilled standing there in running shorts and a T-shirt. Quite confident he was that he would be comfortable once he warmed up, and that would take only a minute or two.

After a couple minutes of stretching, Jake set out on his run. Remembering the movie *The Marathon Man* and the efforts of the Dustin Hoffman character to deal with his frustrations through the pains and blisses of long-distance running, he headed into Central Park and up towards the reservoir. He was feeling warm and breathing well when he started a loop and breathing a bit harder, though still feeling well, when he'd completed it. Down into the southern stretches of the park and then around a bit before he headed out at the corner of Central Parks West and South. With sore legs and sore throat and lungs agreeably pushed to their limit, or close enough that they felt cleared out and cleaner than they had been in months, Jake stopped running and began his cooldown walk. Before he'd strided too far, he checked his pulse and found it was 165. Telling himself that wasn't too bad for a 29 year-old, he smiled and looked up to receive a nice smile from a very attractive, forties woman who was passing. He smiled more broadly and so did she, and he couldn't resist turning to look at her, auburn hair and a nice figure, if maybe a little plump.

And the woman had also turned to look at Jake, giving him another smile. He wondered if she were inviting his attention, but...

"No," he told himself. "You already have too many new affairs to deal with." And he knew there was one affair which he hoped to blossom into a platonic friendship, one which had romantic possibilities, and there were

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business affairs which might lead to career advancement and maybe personal wealth.

Life seemed good, if a bit confusing and a bit demanding.

As he walked north along the west side of Central Park, Jake felt mildly intoxicated as various dreams were shifting about on the edge of his imagination, nearly all of those dreams coming to a single focus in perhaps a few years:

Jake Preskile, Executive Vice-President and Chief Financial Officer of GRF, Inc, married to a wealthy and fascinating woman who had her own greatly successful career as a Wall Street Lawyer.

He told himself he didn't despise his father's ambition of simply owning a nice house, comfortable and suitably large for a family of five. . .

He didn't even despise his father and mother for having chosen one of those dreadful raised-ranches. . .

He didn't despise his mother for wanting to be a full-time homemaker and mother. . .

It was just that life had opened up other possibilities for Jake. . .

And, after all, it had been his father's generation which had created the world which rewarded him for rejecting his father's more modest dreams. . .

Jake told himself a man had to be realistic about. . .

With his mind entangled by lines of thought he didn't wish to follow. . .

With his eyes watering. . .

Turning towards the park, he took several deep breaths with those treacherous eyes shut. After a few seconds, he felt safe in opening his eyes once more, and he looked up into the trees and then to the west where he could see a greater expanse of open sky. It was a glorious day, a bit brisk, a bit chilly but not for October. As his eyes returned to his more immediate surroundings, he saw that he was just across from the street where Mary Pride lived. That seemed a dangerous route to travel.

If he had settled down near his hometown and had happened to meet Mary Pride. . .

Living in a small town, she might well have been the best woman he could have married. Despite her own success in corporate life, and she'd nearly reached the top for personnel managers, she was clearly not enamored

of that corporate life and might not be the best ally for him as he strove to reach the top.

Jake felt a sudden chill pass up his chest and started walking again, knowing he certainly didn't want to get sick when his life was getting interesting. He was thinking of heading home at a slow jog to warm up again, but before he could get going, he saw three attractive young women jogging towards him, each wearing a nice running suit. They all smiled and the one on his side waved in a very friendly way. The one in the middle, a dark-skinned woman with dark-brown hair called out, "Aren't you the brave one in your shortie shorts."

He waved back and smiled but said nothing though he turned to watch as they ran down the sidewalk. They had been the ones to smile at him, one had spoken to him in a friendly way. Though she might well have spoken in the same tone of voice to a ten year-old boy, or a seventy year-old man hobbling along. Still...

Jake realized he was all revved up. Both women and high finance were on his mind and both seemed to him worthy of great efforts by an ambitious and talented young man.

With his mind in a wonderful tangle of opportunities all but realized and successes all but guaranteed, Jake turned down his street and then bounded up the stairway to a brownhouse to find he'd gone to the wrong apartment building. He smiled at his own spaceyness, quite unusual for him. He'd not had a chance to turn and walk back down the stairs when the door opened and Jake found himself facing a young woman with their noses nearly touching. He could smell the sweetness of her breath and then he caught a whiff of some delicate scent which she wore. She was blonde with streaks of brunette. Her skin was a little splotched but not badly. Her eyes were green. Her mouth very pretty, though her right hand fluttered up to cover that feature which so distinguished a blandly pretty face of the sort often seen in old movies and television shows. They stood staring at each other for a few seconds before Jake stammered out, "I'm sorry. I live next door and I wasn't paying attention. I walked..."

She had uncovered that pretty mouth and was still smiling at Jake. He was confused, reminding himself that he'd learned long ago in his business courses and his business life that opportunities tended to come in bunches for a time and to dry up completely at other times. But too many opportunities could distract a man so that he might mess up on all of them.

"I've seen you going into your apartment building," she said in a husky

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voice like that of many jazz singers.

He stammered, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to block you like this,” but she smiled and replied, “That’s all right.”

When she saw Jake blush, she smiled a bit differently, almost playfully, and told him, “I almost spoke to you a couple of times. Last week when I saw you coming back with a bag of groceries, I had just walked up to this door and I almost turned around to pretend I was just leaving and. . . You were coming down the sidewalk and it would have been perfect timing. . .” She examined Jake’s face for a moment or two before volunteering her hand and saying, “My name is Charlotte. Charlotte Lewis.”

“I’m Jake Preskile, though I’m thinking about changing my name to ‘Lucky Jake.’”

Charlotte beamed. “I was just going out to grab myself a cup of coffee, Jake. Would you like to join me, or do you need to. . .”

After an awkward silence of a few seconds, Jake suggested, “Shower?” and then laughed as Charlotte looked ready to apologize. “Why don’t you come up to my apartment if you want some coffee? If you don’t mind, you can keep the coffee-pot company while I shower and make myself smell a little better.”

She hesitated for just a second and then countered with, “How about if I go down to the deli and get us some rolls or Danish? It will only take fifteen minutes and then I’ll ring you. . . Or you can come over to my place. Or. . .”

“Okay. My place in fifteen minutes.”

She nodded, and seemed to be studying him with some serious intent. Jake felt warm inside, but he also heard a little voice telling him not to scatter his efforts over too many opportunities.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes after he’d entered his own apartment building, Jake was blow-drying his hair and brushing it into place as he stood in front of the mirror on the door of his bedroom closet. He was calmly contemplating the image staring back at him, the image he presented to the world, the image which was apparently attractive to women, for one set of reasons, and to his bosses, for another set. He thought his features to be too sharp, his eyes a bit too piercing, but some women seemed to find his face attractive. He knew himself to be too easily flustered, but he had come from a blue-

collar background and was living and working in more rarefied territory than that; he was gaining poise, his bravado was morphing into a better grounded self-confidence.

“Not bad, though you need some work, young fellow.”

And it was just then that the phone rang. He fetched the cell-phone which was in its holster on his night-table, but he'd not yet spoken when the bell rang announcing someone who wanted to get into the building. “Damn it. Why do things all happen at the same time.” In a more calm voice, he spoke into the cell-phone: “Good morning, Jake Preskile here.”

“Jake,” and the slightly raspy voice of Ev Thornsby paused for a few seconds as Jake was walking out of his bedroom and heading towards the security unit near the door to his apartment. That pause gave Jake time to say, “Excuse me, Mr Thornsby, someone is buzzing my door-bell.” Holding the cell-phone away a couple of feet, Jake spoke into the microphone built into the security unit: “Is that you, Charlotte?”

“Yes, it's me, Jake.”

Jake was speaking rapidly as he said, “Come on up, Charlotte. 4C in the back of the building. I'm on the phone.” He'd pressed the button to release the door even while speaking, and the light came on before he'd finished, confirming she'd opened the door.

Putting the cell-phone back to his cheek, Jake apologized, “I'm sorry Mr Thornsby. A friend was coming up for coffee and she buzzed the same time that the phone rang.”

Mr Thornsby laughed and said, “Don't apologize for having a social life. When you have one of those, things tend to happen at the same time. Far too often.” The raspiness of the voice worried Jake as it was a sign the Chief Financial Officer was smoking more than usual, and that was a sign he was under some sort of stress. Jake wondered if there was a problem or maybe...

Had a new opportunity arisen? Were things going better than anticipated?

Mr Thornsby spoke and had not gotten more than two sentences out before Jake knew what was needed and could have ended the conversation there, but his boss was given to precise explication, even when discussing matters where Jake was the expert. And, so, he let Mr Thornsby talk on while he started constructing a work-flow chart in his head, planning out the extraction of some data from SEC filings and some from the internal data supplied by Baxton. Plug some of that data into macros he's already

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written for the presentation software used at CMBG and it would be all done and he could help make Mr Thornsby look like a hero.

There came a light tap at the door. Jake opened it as his mind was moving from matters of data and of analytical substance to matters of presentation. Charlotte was standing there, seeming sheepish, perhaps even a bit apologetic that she was intruding upon a man so busy and so important. Jake smiled at her gently and started towards his kitchen, signalling for her to follow. Which she did, after closing the door behind her. And soon enough, Jake was feeling on top of the world, his mind working over the material to be summarized and analyzed and presented, other parts of him feeling comfortable as he watched Charlotte moving through his cabinets and around his table and up the counter-space and back again. She was making short work of learning where this bachelor kept his coffee and spoons and mugs.

As hard as Jake's mind was working on the Baxton project, he found a part of that mind concentrating on Charlotte. She seemed to be a lot like his mother, for both good and bad. Not that he thought there had been anything bad about his mother, but his father had been a tool-maker; a man on his way up in the corporate world might have different needs. . .

As Jake was working away, he heard Mr Thornsby still speaking: "Theophilus Baxton has developed a highly sensitive social consciousness. And I wouldn't fault him for that. He feels some responsibility for the workers who have made the company what it is. . . It might be bad timing, because, as you know, Mary Pride is also worried about the same matters. And I don't blame her either, but we'll have to make sure that Theophilus and Mary never meet, unless you or I happen to be there to control the flow of the conversation. But I want her to continue to work on this project. She makes me confident the work will be done on time and accurately. So, why don't you have her pull together some estimates of the likely changes in benefit levels and also the likely cuts in employment levels over the next three years, emphasizing the number to be eliminated by way of attrition, normal retirements or voluntary departures. I'm rethinking my plans to have her come up here to work on-site. At least I'm not sure I want her up here until the deal is set and the Baxtons are all happy."

"I suspect she won't be too happy with the results of her analysis. In fact, I think she may have already started and already isn't too happy."

"Get involved in finalizing the numbers and keep matters under control. You can repeat my promise that the severance packages and outplacement

program will be generous.”

“I think things will go smoothly, Mr Thornsby.”

“That’s what I figured. I have a lot of confidence in you, but we want to make sure this little deal works on the first go-around. I don’t want to have to fix anything up after the fact. That’s often embarrassing and sometimes costly.”

Jake set the cell-phone down on his kitchen table and sat down, his eyes intent on Charlotte as she poured the coffee into two mugs. “Cream and sugar?”

“No, I take it black.”

She set the mug of hot brew in front of him and then set a plate of danishes and muffins in the center of the table. “That’s enough for three or four people, Charlotte.”

Carrying her own mug of coffee, Charlotte returned to the table before she smiled sheepishly at him and apologized, “I’m sorry. It’s just that I didn’t know what you would want.” She cut a blueberry muffin in half and took only one of the pieces. Jake reached over to take the other half, but she took it first and buttered it for him.

“I couldn’t help overhearing that you might be going away for a few days.”

“Probably one or two days. Fairly routine work but it requires some eye-to-eye contact.”

“Yes,” spoke Charlotte as she looked up at Jake, “there are certain things that require a lot of eye-to-eye contact. In the graphics business, every client wants eye-to-eye contact and hand-holding. The nature of the beast, I guess.”

“So, you’re in an artistic business?”

“I’m not an artist. I wanted to be a real artist when I was in high school, but not many people have real talent and I’m not one of them. But I draw pretty well and I can work with computer graphics pretty well, though it doesn’t take much for me to get confused with computer programs.”

“I’m sure you do fine. I’m not Alfred Sloane but that still leaves a lot of room for me to be pretty good as a financial manager.”

“Who was Alfred Sloane?”

“He took General Motors and divided it into competitive divisions.” Deciding he didn’t want to talk about business with Charlotte, Jake told her, “Music is the only sort of art that’s ever been too interesting to me.”

“Do you play an instrument?”

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“I sing. At least I used to sing. A tenor of middling amateur talent. Not a real singer.”

“A real singer? Like Pavrotti or... somebody like that?”

“Like somebody like that.”

She laughed and covered her mouth again. Jake wondered why she did that. Her mouth was so pretty, and her teeth were a little yellow but most people had yellowish teeth unless they bleached them as if they were china tea-cups. He decided he was going to get to know Charlotte well enough to maybe get a look behind her pleasant mannerisms. “How about if we get together Thursday evening, Charlotte?”

“I’ve got a project to finish for a client and it’s due Friday morning, so it’s possible I’ll have to work late Thursday.”

“Friday?”

“How about Saturday?”

“Sure thing. I’ll see about getting some tickets for Broadway...” His voice drifted off as she grimaced. “Well, there’s Off-Broadway but I don’t know much about that stuff. Or there might be something at the Lincoln Center but it could be hard getting tickets at the last minute.”

“I’ll check with some of my friends who belong to theater groups and see what they recommend.” When Jake nodded, she added, “I’ll give you a call about what I find out. You’ll be back by at least Thursday?” He nodded and they settled into the written details: phone-numbers were exchanged, both for their apartments and for their cell-phones. They also exchanged e-mail addresses. And that reminded Jake that Kirsten, oddly enough, had not had an e-mail address on her card. It had been a personal card, not a business card. Maybe she used e-mail only for business?

18 Running from an Exploiter

“New York City people can be strange.” With that comment and no explanation, Mary Pride led Missie Cunningham into *The Barn of Books*, the largest bookstore in New York City, or so claimed the sign on the front. “Maybe the largest in the Solar System,” added Mary with a nod towards that sign.

“Largest isn’t always best,” said Missie without much conviction but a little flush to her cheeks. With an air only slightly embarrassed, she explained, “At least that’s what my Grandma used to say. It wasn’t until I was twelve or so that I knew what she was joking about.”

“Well, I hope you don’t understand it too well.”

“Not much experience, if that’s what you mean, but I understand it completely.”

Mary stopped and looked at Missie, forcing the young woman to stop and gaze innocently back at her silent interrogator. But the silence was broken by Mary asking, “Did your grandmother really talk like that? In front of you and other young girls?”

“Grandma was a devil, but her bark was worse than her bite in most ways. She married at seventeen and I don’t think she ever looked at another man besides grandpa. Except for the young men in the family since she was always preparing to make matches. She did like to watch John Wayne and Robert Mitchum. She used to make me watch movies with her sometimes. I had to watch that movie about the marine stuck on the island with the nun. . . It was a pretty good movie, but after the third time I saw it, I was saying some of the lines along with them. She also liked Burt Lancaster a lot and made me watch that movie about the French guys trying to keep the Nazis from stealing the pictures.”

“*The Train*.” When Missie said nothing in response, Mary told her, “Sounds like your grandma really liked the tough guys.”

“Yeah, she didn’t like pretty boys. . .”

Wondering at the way Missie’s voice died off, Mary felt compelled to ask, “Does your grandmother think you have lousy taste in young men?”

“She told me all women nowadays have lousy taste in men, except for the Amish women who go for a man who can plow a field all day and then go home and build a chest of drawers in the evening.”

“That what your grandfather was like?” When Missie nodded, Mary told her, “Mine also. My father was pretty good with his hands but not as good as Grandpa. When he was younger, my grandfather had built a heating system for the first house he bought, and he built it out of scrap parts he bought for a couple of dollars from the mill in town.”

“You know, Mary, you’re just like the older sister I never had. I can say so many things to you that I could never say to my mother or to most grownups.”

Mary smiled in thanks for the compliment, but she was wondering if she really wished to know all of Missie’s secrets, though she doubted if the girl had too many wicked acts in her past. “If you really want to check out the teenaged romance books, go pick out a couple and meet me over in the adult fiction section or at the cash register. I’ll buy you two books, but I wish you’d pick out some good books instead.”

Missie wrinkled up her face and said, “I read enough good books in school. Hemingway and Fitzgerald and some guys from the nineteenth century who are even more boring. At least I can understand what Hemingway is saying. I don’t want to read *War and Peace* on my own time. Even if I had a hundred weekends to spare, which I don’t.”

Mary stood speechless for just a second before she told Missie, “Go pick out your books. I’ll see you in twenty or thirty minutes.”

“Twenty or thirty minutes? It takes you that long to pick out a book or two? When you’re all alone and not talking to someone?”

“Well, if I’m going to invest a bit of my time and my energy, even a little bit of my soul, in a book, I want it to be a worthwhile read.”

“Whatever.” With that, Missie moved away in a peculiar gliding sort of a bouncy walk. Mary sighed as she watched her young friend depart and then something caught her attention in the periphery of her vision. Her eyes shifted and focused upon. . .

A man stood facing away from her, looking at books in the modern history shelves. He had dark curly hair and was wearing one of those three-season jackets. A magenta jacket! It seemed to be too much a coincidence

and then she became more certain it was him as she saw him move several steps. He shuffled a little as he walked, as if he weren't quite aware of where his feet were. And it came to her that the man in the coffee-shop had walked like that. Just like Mary's father! She wondered if he was following her or if she had simply found herself in a Dickens novel. If she fled to Europe, would she spot him walking in a crowd in Piccadilly Square? In line waiting to see the Sistine Chapel? Could she then flee to Australia only to see him climbing the steps to the Sydney Opera House just ahead of her? What would she say if she were to find herself seated next to him in a restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf out in San Francisco?

Mary had managed to move on without an obvious halt in her movement, though her thoughts had been jerked onto a different path; she was fearing he might have some sort of mirror on his glasses so that he could see her moving around behind her. And then she remembered that the fellow down in Greenwich Village had not been wearing glasses. True enough it was that he might need glasses just for reading, but...

Missie! Suppose that man really were after Missie? Mary started to move in Missie's direction, picking a path that kept her out of his sight, so long as he didn't turn fully around. Then the game might be up...

She stopped for just a second and asked herself, "What game? I have no reason to believe he has no-good on his mind." But there didn't seem to be any reason to take a chance. Missie had said he'd gone right after her, just like that creep who'd spotted her near the bus station and had chased her halfway across Manhattan. Mary decided to keep to her plan, to avoid letting the man see her. And she went on, weaving her way through the art-books and then through the bargain books which she had once browsed and found to contain everything from collections of Einstein's essays to histories by Dave Barry to poems by teenaged rock stars.

Refocusing her thoughts upon her present duty, Mary excused her way across the line in front of the cash register and was about to make her way back to teenage romance when she noticed that many heads had turned to watch something happening near the front door. Afraid she might see Missie leaving in the grasp of the man in the magenta jacket, Mary turned but saw nothing out of the ordinary. There was just a small crowd of people coming in...

And a woman she didn't recognize had just walked in. Not only were heads turning, but people were beginning to move...

Mary had not before noticed the tables set up to the side of the front

entrance, near the racks of magazines. And then she shifted her eyes to be sure that Missie wasn't being dragged out of the store. After taking a few steps towards the door, finding herself in a general flow towards the book-signing tables, Mary returned her attention to the woman but didn't recognize her though many of the people in the store were sniffing her up. . .

It seemed likely the woman was a celebrity author of some sort and was here for a book-signing visit. And Mary was suddenly frightened when she saw Missie moving towards the book-signing table. Two seconds later, she saw the man in the magenta jacket moving quietly behind Missie, towards the book-signing table but his frown contrasted greatly with Missie's smile. And it wasn't clear he'd even noticed Missie. Still did Mary quickly join the laggards amongst the unknown writer's fans; she double-stepped, lingered, and then double-stepped again with that crowd. She could see Missie looking around and thought her young friend was likely looking for her benefactor to give her money to pay for an autographed copy of. . .

A shudder came as the title was familiar to Mary. The sign near the table said *From Birmingham to Bandung* and Mary remembered it from the new books section at the public library. This one had a different cover. . .

One which Mary found tastelessly explicit. She had never thought of herself as prudish, but she didn't think even a fictional teenager should be showing nearly all of her. . .

Parts.

And on the cover of a book sold in respectable bookstores all over the country. And a country which already had a problem with young women letting themselves be treated as objects. She wondered if it could be good for young women to even see such covers in all the bookstores and all the drug-stores and groceries. If they were as attractive as the creature on the cover, they might think of themselves as also being on display. If they were flat-chested or chubby or covered with acne. . .

Grabbing hold of Missie's upper arm with a gentle firmness, Mary steered the surprised young woman out of the autograph line and over towards the side-wall of the store, shelves going from the floor to nearly eight feet high. A quick glance let her know she was in the region colored by Stendhal and traveled by Stegner. She calmed down a bit until she saw that Missie's eyes were wandering back towards the table where sat the author of *From Birmingham to Bandung*. . .

But there was a more immediate concern. . .

"That man was right behind you, Missie."

“So? He wasn’t going to grab me in a crowd.”

“I don’t really think he intends you any harm anyway. The more I think about it, the more sure I am that he was just running after you to offer you help.”

“Then why did you just drag me halfway across the bookstore?”

“I . . .” Mary reddened and confessed, “I just had this feeling that you were in some sort of danger.” And she looked back to see the curly-haired man leaving the bookstore. He was shaking his head, though she knew not if he were expressing wonder or disgust. Nor did she know what was disturbing his mind and heart. Was it that author and her book or was it Mary’s actions?

19 The Benevolence of the Bookseller

Somewhat confused by the actions of the mysterious woman, Bayard left *The Barn of Books* and began to walk north, jogging towards the west every so often. Why had she dragged that girl away...

“Of course,” he suddenly spouted out to his own surprise, “She had wanted to protect that girl from exposure to that trashy book the woman was promoting.” Bayard’s heart jumped for joy at the realization that he and that woman were as one in their views of the dangers of modern society. Or at least moving in parallel.

Bayard’s ears were being insulted by a boom-box pounding out some sort of rhythmic ode to the joys of raping eight year-olds when a man suddenly appeared at his right, coming up to within three feet or so of him. “Hey, Mister, we got videos of guys with girls...” and the man winked to let Bayard know the girls were very young indeed, “and we’ve got women making it with German Shepherds. We’ve got movies of women licking each other all over...” and the man winked again to let Bayard know they didn’t miss any spots.

The man continued to talk, very rapidly, but the words meant nothing to Bayard. He just turned and stared towards a row of three very similar shops displaying advertisements for videos and books and...

One of the stores had a sign:

\$5 for a long minute with Loretta, the foulest-mouthed woman in New York City.

And he stopped, no longer just staring in horrified wonder, but frozen as if his muscles had been hit with some sort of paralyzing drug. His insides trembled, though not his exterior, and he felt himself near the edge of

some pit. Frozen there, so he couldn't move forward to see down into the depths of Hell, but he couldn't retreat. The porno-barker walked away from Bayard and headed towards a small group of men in their late teens or early twenties. Watching the man with only the edges of his perceptions, Bayard thought something important was going on here, and he told himself:

It is in his self-interest and not from his benevolence that this exploiter acts in such a manner.

That strange phrasing of his own thought left Bayard still more greatly confused. He was afraid it was another sign of his own deeply internalized depravity. Feeling his stomach tightening, Bayard turned and continued his way down the street, no longer sure where he was.

He was pondering a problem.

He was scared stiff.

For his own sake.

For the sake of others.

How much of that stuff penetrated the individual and stayed inside of him, biasing his view of the outer world, perverting his attitudes towards other people? How much of that stuff was in Bayard himself?

Was this the modern equivalent of demonic possession? No, Bayard thought it was not so much possession as destruction of barriers. The demonic ideas reamed their way into the brain, leaving the skull quite porous. No one could be alone inside their own heads, no train of thought could develop without being interrupted by the latest and greatest pop-tune or an advertisement for a movie which showed human bodies being ripped apart in new and improved ways. Brains flowing into each other and into the rivulets that flowed through the gutters of the public square.

There was no private life in the modern world because there were no private insides.

Nothing was there but images of alien creatures chewing their way through human bodies, bombs or bullets ripping their way through human bodies, human beings eating or raping one another, and—perhaps worst of all—sarcastic parents ripping their way through the souls and minds of children.

Bayard walked over a couple of blocks and then headed north towards the relaxing plant-life of Central Park. He was now convinced that his

insides were no longer under his control. He was filled with images of violence and degradation, filled with all sorts of filth.

20 A Dickens of a Meeting

For an unknown time, Bayard walked vaguely north, trying to leave behind the region of Loretta the foul-mouthed woman, but he feared that region to be also inside of him. He was now fearing for himself as much as he had been fearing for the children of the modern world. He was afraid that he was no more sane, morally or intellectually, than the people shooting or viewing videos of women making it with German Shepards.

It was not the first time that his mind had been in a state of seething confusion, but Bayard realized there was now a frightening difference to his unsettled state: having started to separate himself from the surrounding society that he might critique it more fairly, he found that he had stepped over the side of an unstable boat and into the water. He felt free, and he was freely sinking and then. . .

Just when a moment of weakness had led to thoughts of returning to the boat, he'd turned back to see it was an inferno and not long for the surface.

Confused and muddled. Dazed and stunned. Generally demoralized. He had desired to produce a hardheaded but soft-hearted analysis of his society but all that was in his head had softened into an anarchic, addled mess. His heart was hardening as if to protect itself. Petrous and pockmarked where life had cast its rain and hailstones down upon him.

Bedlam above and rock below. And it was in such a state that he lost intimate contact with his surroundings, aware only that a large park lay across the street to his right. And it was in such a state that he found himself red-face to red-face with the woman who had penetrated his insides to co-exist with the horrors of modern entertainment. He reached out, instinctively and reflexively, steadying the brown-paper bag as it started to fall from the cradle formed by those arms which he desired to be wrapped around him, though he'd been trying to fight off such desires in the interest

of his mission.

As he stood there, a head of lettuce, a cucumber, and a small bag of radishes fell into his hands. Several seconds passed and people were bumping into them, some swearing as they bounced off and continued on their way—southward or cutting across southward traffic to enter the nearby street—and Bayard reddened again. He was a traffic obstacle, and in his current low state of confidence was convinced he was no more than that, would never be more than that; and his thoughts. . .

His thoughts were centering around this woman he didn't even know. His various parts were sinking and rising and spinning and he wasn't even sure what those parts were. He was still undecided about a man having true parts. . .

Holding the salad vegetables in his hands, Bayard stuck out his elbow and used his forearm to help support the sagging bag of groceries. At the same time, he motioned with his eyes and head towards the inside edge of the sidewalk, where a fence stood, guarding a postage stamp of a yard in front of a four-story townhouse. Once they were in a quiet zone, the flow of traffic being at least a couple of feet away, Bayard put himself in position to guard the woman against the general north-to-south flow of pedestrian traffic, and he found himself looking directly into brown eyes that seemed both soft and guarded. He had stared into those eyes for a moment or two before he found himself surprised that she had so readily yielded to the request of his eyes.

He had expected her to be afraid of him, had imagined she thought of him as some sort of monster who had tried to prey upon that young woman, the runaway, though he had been chasing her to offer his assistance. To his surprise, he saw that this woman wasn't even nervous, let alone afraid. And he was quite pleased to get a feeling that she was attracted to him; she was openly studying his face and seemed to be trying to penetrate his thoughts.

"I really wasn't chasing that girl to do her harm. I'm not sure what I could have really done for her, but that expression of fear on her face. . ." Not sure he was making his point, he added, "Some of my friends have accused me of having an over-active protective instinct towards women and children."

"A lot of men have one, or imagine they do, even when their help isn't needed or wanted."

Bayard was uncomfortably silent for a few seconds before telling her, "You're a very pretty woman. I mean, your eyes. . . Your skin. . ."

Somewhat embarrassed that he was being so explicit in talking to this woman he didn't know, Bayard grew silent. He placed the salad vegetables back in the bag and then started to take that paper sack from the woman's arms. She resisted at first but then let the bag go.

She told him, "I live just partway up the street."

"I know..." Bayard's voice sputtered quickly towards nothingness and he was silent for a second or two before he tried to explain, "I saw you walk away with that girl and I was afraid you were one of those people who exploit... I mean, you looked like a very decent person and your eyes are so... But I wasn't close enough to see your eyes and I figured it would be a good cover to look very respectable and... Well, I followed you when you brought her to your apartment building."

The woman didn't seem overly upset at his confession. In fact, she seemed inclined to ignore it, at least for now, and he didn't yet know if there would be a later for them, though he was hoping...

"Would you like to meet Missie and explain everything yourself?" After he nodded, she said, "I'm Mary Pride."

Shifting the bag so that it was cradled in his left arm, Bayard offered his right hand and tried not to show too much of his happiness. "I'm Bayard Raines. Bayard Townes Raines, but some people tell me my full name doesn't pan too well. Too many hisses."

She smiled politely at his joke and then turned to lead the way down the street. A minute later, she'd opened the front door of a five story brick townhouse. She then passed the elevator and led him up two flights of stairs. When she stopped at a door labeled '3C', she took keys from a pouch on a belt around her waist and was soon leading him inside her apartment and then into a small and orderly kitchen.

After setting the bag of groceries upon the table, Bayard stood uncomfortably for a few seconds as Mary seemed to be studying him while she took off her hat and gloves and then her jacket. She seemed to be expecting something from him, but he wasn't sure until she asked, "Would you like to take off your coat and stay a while?"

His face reddened as he did as she had requested and handed his coat to her. She disappeared for a short time and came back to tell him, "I hung your jacket up in the small closet near the front door."

He wasn't sure what to say, but he felt the urge to say something, and then he heard himself say, "You look a lot like Emmie Lou Harris, I mean in your face and especially around your mouth."

With eye-brows raised, Mary asked, "Is that good?" And then followed another short silence while Bayard struggled to think of something to say. She seemed to be amused as she stood there and studied him. Then, as if letting him off the hook, she asked, "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"I prefer coffee, but tea would be fine."

But Mary was already moving towards the counter, saying only, "Coffee is no problem. I prefer it myself, but I usually make tea when I'm here by myself."

And again, Bayard felt himself struggling to think of something interesting or friendly to say, but he'd not thought of something before he heard movement and he looked over to see the teenaged girl, Missie, standing in the doorway, looking at him with some concern and some suspicion, but she was far from ready to bolt. It was clear she was just waking up, and, seeing her more closely, it was more clear that she was a very attractive young woman. She would have been in great danger on the streets of New York City, though he figured any child or teenager was in danger on the streets of nearly any modern city.

Still, if she wasn't overly hostile, Missie didn't look ready to make friends with him. In the irritated voice of one who didn't wake up easily, she asked him, "What are you doing here? Are you following us around New York City?"

Bayard decided to take no insult, but he remained silent, once again not able to think of something appropriate to say.

From behind him, he heard Mary ask, "Cream and sugar?"

"Just black, please." Missie walked past Bayard and opened the refrigerator to take out a diet cola and, a moment later, the three of them were sitting, rather snugly, around the table in that small kitchen as Mary told Missie how she'd run into Bayard out on the street.

Mary and Missie made some sort of joke about someone named Trixie and it took Bayard a short while to figure out that this Trixie was apparently a character in some television show. He let his mind drift off, no longer interested in the conversation, but he was happy that few thoughts came. For some unknown amount of time, he drifted along peacefully and happily in some sort of mental space and then he lifted his mug of coffee and looked over the rim to find both Mary and Missie staring at him. "Mary asked you," explained Missie in a voice tinged with boredom, "what you are doing in New York City. You don't strike us as a true New Yorker."

Once more, Bayard found himself speechless, but he was glad when

Mary spoke up, asking, "Are we boring you, Missie?"

"I think I'll go watch TV," and politely but quickly did Missie take her leave, and she left Mary shaking her head and looking out into the apartment.

"What kind of junk does she watch on TV?" Bayard immediately wished he could pull back the words and more so the tone of voice. He was fighting off a return of those feelings of confusion and bitterness and didn't want to inflict any of his misery upon Mary.

But she didn't seem to pay much heed to the question, getting up and going over to the cabinets near the sink. She fetched various utensils and bowls and a large baking pan before saying, "I promised Missie I'd make her a vegetable lasagne if you'd like to stay for dinner." She looked at him with an open smile to let him know it was more than a polite invitation, and he returned the smile before nodding.

And Mary set to work slicing fresh vegetables. Bayard watched her for a few seconds before she looked up to meet his gaze and tell him, "To get back to your question. . . Missie doesn't have bad tastes given the choices. I'm sure she's going to check the music channels first. Her preference is for those young women singers with mediocre voices but a willingness to display their young body parts for all the world to see."

Not quite sure what to say in response, Bayard felt himself shifting into a serious, contemplative mood as he watched Mary move around her small working area, striding—but only a step and a half to the refrigerator, returning with some peppers before moving the chopping block over and then grabbing a colander.

"Were you a Tom-boy?"

She looked over in surprise but then smiled. "Why do you ask?"

"You move like an athlete."

She laughed and asked, "You mean Tom-boys move differently from girlie-girls?" And then, after seeming to be amused by his red face, she went on to tell him, "I didn't play a lot of organized sports. Field-hockey in my sophomore year and junior year. Then I lost interest. I used to hike and fish a lot with my grandfather and sometimes with my father. Grandpa used to take me horseback riding sometimes; I think that was to please me because he used to hang on for dear life, even though the people at the stables knew to give him a bomb-proof horse that was better suited to plowing than racing." As he watched her and listened to her, he felt happy that she was seeming to loosen up and to lighten up. In an outright

cheerful voice, she went on to tell him, "I even hunted with them some. Never shot more than a couple of ducks. Total. For my entire hunting career. And I never even took so much as a shot at a deer, though I spent some long, cold hours on deer-stands with Dad or Grandpa."

"You know, you could get in trouble letting a runaway stay in your apartment without..." Bayard stopped short, confused by his sudden change in topic, wondering why he had destroyed a pleasant mood.

Mary sighed and then explained, "I've already tried to get Missie to call her mother. I'm not good at restraining people and I don't want her to run away from me and go back out on the streets, though I think she's now realized that isn't such a romantic option."

"Are teenagers now running our society? Or even children?" Mary cast him a quick glance as she turned to carry the fresh ingredients over to the stove where the bottled sauce was already warming up in a sauce pan. He went on as she remained silent: "Legally and morally, her parents should be informed about where she is. You're courting possible problems. But I would guess that she is blackmailing you, threatening to run away again if..." Mary had shut him off with a finger at her lips and a nod in the direction of the living-room where a pleasantly mediocre female voice was crooning away. He could imagine the grinding of her seventeen year-old hips...

Bayard didn't know how to redirect his thoughts or the conversation he'd just screwed up. No, he wasn't at all sure what to say until he remembered...

And then he told her, "I was listening to a world music show once and this fellow from Scotland was on talking about the interaction between African musicians and Scottish folk musicians. He said a lot of the Scottish groups had returned to traditional Gaelic rhythms and percussion instruments, partly because they'd seen what the African drummers could do by using parts of their bare hands to produce a greater variety of rhythms and sounds. It's less monotonous than just having the music driven by a snare-drum's rat-ta-tat all the time."

Mary nodded at a waterscape picture that hung over her toaster and told him, "That's the Firth of Forth and it's as much as I know about Scotland."

"You're letting her blackmail you. Just as we teachers let students and parents blackmail us in recent decades."

"You're a teacher?" When Bayard nodded, Mary asked, "History and

government?”

Her voice had been tinged with something akin to annoyance and Bayard decided to cool it with the social criticism for a while. In a quiet voice, he told Mary, “Mathematics and physics mostly, though I did cover for a composition course once.”

She just nodded and went on to setting the sauce to simmer. After returning to the table, she kept her eyes upon her pile of peppers and onions and mushrooms as she scooped them into a bowl. “You remind me of some of the young and already worn-out teachers I had. Men and women who’d entered the profession in the 1970s. They were idealists who’d come out of the 1960s turmoil and they were pretty confused in many ways, but they were also pretty serious about doing something to really help people. I know some people came to believe they did more harm than good, but I’m not sure that was their fault. If they passed on a lot of moral and intellectual confusion, they had been victims as much as their students.”

“Teachers are adults. They’re responsible for what they teach. The subject matter and also the moral attitudes. And a lot of those teachers at that time had so mindlessly taken in all that 60s crap that they almost gave a bad name to things like creativity.”

“I rather liked the emphasis on creativity in those days. I know it wasn’t done very well, but it would have taken time to do it right. But ever since I was old enough to notice, it’s seemed to me that the education systems in this country just move from one gimmicky program to another, so that the teachers and students are never even given a fair chance to check out what might be good in a program.”

Mary shrugged and Bayard got the impression she wasn’t really interested in discussing school problems any further, though she didn’t exactly seem hostile to his general concerns. But for now. . .

He told her, “My mother used to make a lasagne like that, though she usually put in some meats, but she sautéed the peppers and mushrooms and onions before adding them to the sauce.”

“Did she sauté in butter or olive oil or some other kind of oil?”

“When I was young, she used regular vegetable oil and then she switched to olive oil after my father developed heart trouble. She also started making her own sauce from fresh tomatos.”

“And probably a small can of tomato paste. That’s what I prefer when I have enough time. And,” she looked up and smiled at Bayard, “sometimes I sauté my onions and peppers and mushrooms, but only very lightly. I

prefer them a little crunchy and not cooked down to mush like they are in most prepared sauces and in a lot of restaurants. Although sometimes,” and she paused and bit her lower lip in a way that both excited and worried Bayard, “it’s best to let things stew a little, let things cook down a bit, before you even decide what to do with the entire pot of stuff.”

Bayard wondered if she were really talking about more than tomato sauce, but he knew he thought too much and was afraid he might be reading too much deliberate thought behind her casual comments. Still, she was clearly a smart woman with an active mind, and he asked her, “Wine?” Mary pointed to a small rack holding about eight bottles of red wine. She handed him a cork-screw but left him alone to pick out a bottle, and he selected a Zinfadel for no other reason but. . .

“I like the sound of the name ‘Zinfadel’.”

Mary laughed. “I like the sound of it as well. Maybe even better than the taste.”

“If I had known I’d be coming here, I would have brought. . .” Bayard was surprised at how quickly his voice had died away, but it had been that hand gently brushing across the small of his back. He had not dared to turn and did not turn even when she had gone past. Afraid he was to show her the confused and ecstatic expression on his face as she fetched something from the counter. He was contemplating a response when she brushed against him again on her way back to the pan of lasagne lying on the table. He felt dizzy, though it was a different sort of dizziness from what he’d felt when walking away from the realm of Loretta the foul-mouthed woman.

“You’re awfully tired, Bayard.”

“It’s been a long. . . frustrating day.”

“Frustrating,” repeated Mary in a distant voice that made Bayard wonder what meanings he’d communicated and what meanings Mary would add and. . .

She sighed and then told him, “Well, we’ll have a quick dinner. Get some food in your stomach and then you can go home and get to bed early. Then we can get together again on a day when we both have a little more energy. Maybe we can wander around and visit this city I’ve lived in for nearly three years without paying much attention. Some attention, but not nearly as much as it deserves.”

Not daring to put too much import in Mary’s words and not having the strength to avoid doing so, Bayard tried to regain his balance by steering

in a safe direction: “You’ve been too busy at work?”

After placing the pan in the oven and closing the door, Mary hesitated just a few seconds while staring at something; then she spun around and took two dancing steps over to the table and sat down quickly upon the chair directly across from Bayard. Pushing aside the chopping block, she put her elbows upon the table and then rested her chin and cheeks in her hands cupped together. She locked her gaze upon Bayard freezing him in place.

“I hate to be so aggressive, especially with a guy I just met, but I’m really very flattered at the way you’re not afraid to show you’re so interested in me, even though you’re obviously one of those reserved New Englander types.” Bayard’s heart dropped for just a second. He’d heard that sort of a comment twice before, both times with women he’d just started to date, and that sort of a comment had signalled the end. But Mary was smiling, playfully and sweetly, and was still smiling as she sat back in her chair.

“You’re playing games with me.”

“Of course I am, and you’re trying to play games though you have this serious streak in you that keeps tripping you up.” Mary laughed and reached out to take hold of the wine he’d poured for her.

“And I’m serious about offering you my friendship even though I know it’s not the thing to do nowadays. That is, to be so explicit.”

The woman of Bayard’s recent dreams leaned towards him over the table and rested her face in her open cupped hands. “I just might accept your offer of friendship. You seem a lot different from the corporate types I work with, and they are starting to annoy me.” And she grinned before informing Bayard, “I think my grandfather would have really liked you.”

Bayard was confused, but it was clear that her grandfather’s opinion was, or rather—would have been, quite important to her. And then she stood up and came around to sit on the table right next to Bayard. The calf of her left leg was brushing up against his thigh and he felt a warmth make its way up through his gut. After studying him for a few seconds, Mary dropped from the table and crouched next to him, resting her hand lightly upon his forearm. “I think you’re very tired and very confused. If you need to talk, I’ll have lots of free time pretty soon, but, for now, I’ve got a big project going at work. And I think you need to think some things through on your own. But I’ll be here if you need someone to talk to... Even if I’m real busy, I’ll carve out some time if you need it.”

Part IV

Preparing for Consummation

21 A Lonely Guy

Bayard felt cold as he walked away from Mary Pride's apartment building and thought that feeling was only partly caused by the rapid cooling of an October evening in New York City. He felt himself to be fading away into a cold, dark region. "Or," he wondered, "is it more accurate to say my life is fading and I'll remain to suffer as a failure in a society which seems stranger and more distant to me with every day?"

Meeting Mary Pride had complicated his situation but, so far as he could tell, any relationship with her could make not save him from a bleak future. Anyway, he'd not come to New York City to seek a romance, not even a stable and permanent relationship, not even with the most wonderful of women. . .

He looked ahead, trying to peer into the future and all he could see was a long journey home, starting with a few blocks along the western edge of Central Park, and then over to meet the subway—from which he exited a station too early. And he traveled on, feeling dizzy whenever he remembered the smell of Mary Pride's hair when he had her against the fence to protect her from the roiled crowd. On the way back to his apartment, Bayard's head started aching as he pondered the fate of children in the modern world, all that horrible stuff, images of violence and perversion being pushed into their heads. And he grew still more worried about his own prospects.

For what seemed hours, he walked and then rode the subway and then walked, all the while his head throbbed. Finally, he reached. . .

A damned closet in a smelly building that probably had ten thousand cockroaches for every human tenant.

He pulled the chair away from the tiny table in the kitchenette area of the room. He sat down but it took only a few seconds for him to decide it was one of the most uncomfortable seats he'd ever endured. Not having many options, he went to the day-bed and sat on the edge, staring first at

the cracks in the opposite wall—nearly in reach, and then he stared at the floor—covered by a linoleum tile which had probably been a light gray a couple of decades ago. After a few seconds of suffering increased by the ache in his tired back, he sat back against the pillows and the wall behind them. Bayard's eyes panned the small room, not a time-consuming task and not a pretty sight. The dingy-gray floor was perhaps the best looking part of the place.

It most certainly was not pretty. Home often wasn't, but this place also was not home, not that he had expected to find himself at home when he'd quit his teaching job to come down to New York City, but this wasn't even a way-station. A burner unit and coffee-pot sitting on a Formica-topped cabinet constituted his kitchen. A day-bed. A table barely large enough for two people was pushed up against the far wall—two steps away from the day-bed—and thus was rendered barely large enough for a single person.

“Why is it not even a way-station? This general area has been a temporary home to great writers and scholars, to folk-musicians, to Wobblies and other radicals on the run, to immigrants on their way to being wealthy businessmen or prosperous American workers.” The line of thought dwindled to nearly nothing as he realized it couldn't be a real way-station because he wasn't headed any place. Not any place he could identify.

And he came to fear for himself, thinking he would be driven to a breakdown. He did not seem right for the society that he had been born into. He had wanted a family, but living a family life in the modern world required a man to expose himself, his wife, and his children to the sort of culture that was intrusive in the strongest sense. It had to be intrusive since a mobile economy with rapid turnover in goods and money was possible only if all, or substantially all, of its citizens would enter the public marketplace, and that, so far as he could figure, was not a half-hearted step. You gave yourself over fully. You opened up your innermost self. . .

Opened up your innermost self? Or did you simply absorb what was out there? Filth and depravity sufficient to satisfy the most pessimistic thinkers in human history. And it was then that Bayard realized he didn't really know too much about those thinkers either. He had a copy of Pascal's *Pensées* in a box in his mother's attic, but he'd no more than browsed through that Jansenistic work. He'd read Augustine's *Confessions* and that book talked about the Manichees a little. One of his friends in college had been raised in a Presbyterian church where the minister and congregation were deliberately trying to return to the ideas of John Knox and John

Calvin and Bayard had gotten an earful of arguments that men were utterly depraved. . .

“Adrian?”

Bayard thought that was the fellow’s name. He’d roomed with him in his sophomore year, after several switches of room-mates on the hall—and Bayard had been the only one willing to live with the morning and evening Bible reading and prayers of. . .

“Adrian?”

It was funny that he couldn’t even be sure of the fellow’s name. They’d actually grown quite close though Bayard had been horrified by some of the pessimistic views about human beings. . .

But Loretta the foul-mouthed woman seemed to confirm some dark view about human nature. And the young men wandering around, offering their souls for exploitation even while they were entertained by the exploitation of the bodies of women, children, and German Shepherds.

Bayard was slipping off to sleep, still dressed in his street-clothes and still leaning against the back of the day-bed—though starting to slip down to a horizontal position. Drowsily, he wondered what Mary was really like. She had been friendly but had spoken little in response to his outbursts of social criticism—if that was what they truly were. Bayard was losing confidence that there was much at all to be said in favor of his behavior and his plans for a bleak but noble future.

It was at that moment he realized that Mary might be a good partner for his mother in her business; his mother had considered expanding from antiques into wholesaling new furniture from the small factories and craftsmen in northern New England. Mary had spoken of her knowledge of hardware, including that which went into furniture and she. . .

And she’d spoken of her father selling his hardware store in a way that indicated she’d rather have inherited that business. . .

A new fear came upon him. A future loomed in which Mary went back to the country to work with his mother, but what was to happen to him and his dreams. . .

Bayard lay, curled up on the top of the bed-spread, trying hard to get to sleep and unable to stop his brain from racing on. . .

22 Just Between Us Girls

Missie giggled. “Boy does he have the hots for you, Mary.”

Mary smiled in an absentminded way, looking down at the book in her hands. It was an extremely well-written book, *The Enigma of Arrival*, but there was something about it that bothered her. She knew she wasn't a literary expert, but it seemed to her that the book had no moral presence. It was all on the surface, a more elaborated surface than that of Hemingway's books, and likely more esthetically pleasing for that but. . .

She wasn't sure if she had a right to expect that moral presence; after all, Mary knew she wasn't a literary scholar. She'd never even been able to make it through some of the great novels of history, unless forced to read through for a course. *The Old Man and the Sea* had been the only Hemingway novel she'd ever enjoyed and Fitzgerald novels had never appealed to her at all, though she'd enjoyed the novels of Ford and dos Passos which were from the same period and had much in common with the books of Hemingway and Fitzgerald but. . .

She wondered if *The Old Man and the Sea* and dos Passos' *USA* trilogy simply had a moral presence missing from *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Great Gatsby*. But she wasn't sure that moral presence was a valid term or concept in literature. Though, on the other hand, it was a strong component of the works of Cervantes and Tolstoy and Turgenev and Melville and. . . Mary shuddered as she remembered seeing the movie *Clockwork Orange* when she was in high school and then she'd read the book and. . . Recently, she'd re-read the book and found it to be frighteningly mild in a world where sadistic cannibals played an important role in popular entertainment.

At the edge of her consciousness, she heard Missie twitter, “He's cute in a dorky way, but I think someone should work with him on his wardrobe. And the beard would have to go if it were me. Though Great-uncle Beauregard's beard was kind of cute until it started falling onto his plate at dinner-time.”

When Mary finally looked out from her thoughts, Missie just smiled in an off-hand manner. Mary smiled in return and dropped her eyes again.

But this time, she said, "I'm just thinking things over. And I'm not really thinking about Bayard, though I do like him. I've actually spent more time thinking about why I'm not attracted to a fellow at work who's a pain-in-the-ass in many ways, but very nice and a true gentleman."

"So, why don't you try to date that fellow also. You might like him more if you spent more time with him. And then you'd have a choice."

Mary laughed and said, "I like Jake a lot as it is, though he has reasons to think I'm a jerk, and I have reasons to think he can be oblivious to the problems of people not as lucky as he is."

A strange expression came across Missie's face and Mary put her book down on the side-table and moved a little closer to the younger woman on the couch. "Are you ready to talk about why you really ran away from home?"

"Why? Do you think you'll be able to get me to go home?"

"Something like that. I promised not to turn you in, I didn't promise that I won't try other ways to get you home. I really think you owe it to your mother, and to yourself, to give her a call." After another short silence, Mary added, "I'll say it just once more. If you want to talk about why you ran away, I'm available and I won't ever say a word to anyone. I'm very experienced in keeping secrets."

Missie chewed on her lower lip for a short while before saying, "I came home early from school one day, and one of my father's best friends was coming down the stairs and..."

Mary remained silent for a few seconds before she finally asked, "And only your mother was there?"

The younger woman nodded.

"And your father knew?" It was only a guess, but Missie nodded.

"I think he was messing around too."

"And then things got nasty?"

"Yeah... They started accusing each other of all sorts of things, in front of me and even in front of my little brothers."

"I imagine your parents continued to love each other and maybe neither one meant to hurt the other. Things can get out of control."

"It doesn't matter what they meant to do. They did hurt each other. And they hurt me and my brothers."

In a voice as gentle as she could manage, Mary pointed out, "And you've

hurt your brothers and your mother and your father by disappearing. They don't even know if you're alive or well."

In a quiet voice, Missie volunteered, "I'll give my mother a call tomorrow."

"Tonight would be better. It's not quite ten and I'm sure she'd be happy to hear from you even if you called in the middle of the night."

With her face contracting into a still more serious expression, Missie asked, "Would you have called my mother if I had refused to again?"

"I would have liked to call, but I would have been afraid you'd run away. And anyway I promised you."

"So you wouldn't have called."

"I didn't say that. Your safety would have been even more important to me than keeping my word."

"You would have called and pretended nothing had happened? So I would have been trapped here when my mother showed up. Or the police?"

"I don't know what I would have done, but I'm afraid for what could happen to you if you went back out as a runaway. Young girls, especially pretty girls, can be awfully tempting targets for certain types of men."

"Or for women who want to make some money off of them."

And Mary was wondering what Missie, and other young women, were exposed to that that knew so much about such nasty aspects of human life. But she said not a word.

* * * * *

Mary listened to Missie greet her mother on the phone near the kitchen-sink and then returned to the living-room. Though a little nervous about how the teenager would explain the set-up, Mary decided there wasn't too much danger that the police would soon be up to arrest her for harboring a fugitive or anything of that sort. She was just rising to return to the kitchen and make some tea when Missie walked in, a numbed expression on her face. Without a word, Mary took hold of the teenager's shoulders and maneuvered her towards the small couch where they sat down side-by-side. By that time, the tears were welling up in Missie's eyes, but she managed to say, "Paul had a heart attack while he was out looking for me in the woods behind our house. He lay there for an hour before anyone found him." After a short struggle to gain control of herself, Missie managed to sob out, "He might die because of me."

And Mary found herself without a response, other than to lean over and give Missie a hug. The two women held on to one another for a good number of seconds before Mary pulled back; she rose and led Missie back to the kitchen. Tea had been made and was being sipped before Mary asked, “Will your mother be coming soon?”

Missie shook her head. “TK is coming up. My cousin. She left school. And. . .” Missie looked a little embarrassed as she asked, “Can TK stay here?” In a rush she added, “She’s really nice and she likes to clean and she’ll be no trouble and I’ll sleep on the couch or even the floor and she can have the spare bed.”

Mary smiled, a bit sadly, and she herself didn’t quite understand why she’d fallen to a deep melancholia. She wondered if it were because her life was so divorced from her moral principles, but then. . .

Of a sudden she felt lighter inside as she first made the admission, if quietly and to herself, that she was definitely going to change her life. More than that, she feared what she would become if she didn’t make a dramatic change.

Mary reached across the table and patted Missie’s hand. “Of course, TK can stay here, but only on one condition.” And she put on a serious expression as she stared at Missie.

In a voice quavering just a bit, Missie asked, “What do I have to do now?”

With tightened lips, Mary let the mood of uncertainty hover over the table for a moment or two before answering, “You have to tell me what ‘TK’ stands for?”

Missie still looked to be uncertain of Mary’s mood but she forced a smile as she said, “Timberly Kay.”

The name was barely out of Missie’s mouth when the phone rang and she jumped up, grabbing the phone after one jumping step. Over her shoulder, she told Mary, “It’s TK.” Mary rose to put water in the tea-kettle, even as she wondered how she would get her schedule under control over the next week. With tears freshly flowing from her eyes but her voice breaking up with both giggles and efforts to not cry, Missie was trying to give the address of Mary’s apartment.

A second later, Mary put the kettle back on to boil and then took the phone from Missie’s hand. “Hello, this is Mary Pride.”

“Hi, are you the nice lady who rescued my cousin?” A shiver went down Mary’s spine at the voice. A dangerous voice it was, one not to be heard

by most men. A low, husky whisper it was. . .

“She’s been staying here since yesterday. She didn’t want to call until she got her thoughts and feelings under control. . .”

“Oh, you don’t have to cover for her. She confessed to her mother that she threatened to run away again when you tried to make her call home. Missie may be immature in some ways, but she’s willing enough to stand up and take the credit or blame for her own actions. She even demands it when she thinks someone is treating her like a child.” In a voice that added one more overlay of husky overtones, TK told her, “You did right.”

All the time she was talking to TK, Mary had been wondering what this woman looked like, and she’d no sooner hung up the hand-set before turning to Missie and asking, “Is your cousin as sexy in person as her voice is?” Missie nodded and Mary heard a whistle coming out of her own mouth. The two women looked at each other for a second and then both broke into giggles.

They were settled back at the kitchen table, with fresh tea in their cups, before Missie asked, “So did you grow up in a quiet house, without. . .” And her voice just drifted off.

“Oh, yeah. Mom and Dad were pretty boring in many ways. Though there was a funny streak to their relationship. Dad had fallen in love with Mom right off and he spent years courting her before he even got a single date. And yet she was the one who ended up being dependent upon him.” Missie looked as if she needed a distraction, and Mary asked, “Do you want to hear the full-blown version? The one I’m writing up to sell to some movie producer?”

“Is it that exciting?”

“Not really. It was a lot like *Ozzie and Harriet*. . .”

“Who?”

“You ever hear any songs by Ricky Nelson?”

“Yeah. I listen to an oldies station sometimes with my mom.”

“He was the son of Ozzie and Harriet Nelson. And he started singing on the show.”

Missie shrugged. “Was it like *Leave it to Beaver*?”

“The Nelsons were a lot like the Cleavers and not much at all like the Osbornes.” Missie shrugged again and Mary decided to go on. “My parents met when my mother moved two houses down from him. They were thirteen at the time. My father says he decided the very first time he saw her that she was the one he would marry. And he told me he’d never even thought

about marrying any girl up to that very instant she got out of a car and walked up the sidewalk to her new house. He'd been more interested in fishing and hot-rods. Anyway, they actually met, face to face, later that day. My father kept watch and he saw her going out a while after she'd first arrived. She reached the public sidewalk near the street and looked around in confusion like she didn't know where she was going, which was certainly true. He casually sauntered out. . . ."

As soon as Mary giggled, Missie joined her for a second or two, and then asked, "Do you mean he kind of ran out at full-speed, tripping over every crack in the sidewalk until he reached her and fell at her feet?"

"Well, the truth is probably somewhere between that and my father's official version."

"Your mother never told you the full story?"

"Not that part. I think it meant too much to my father, and my mother would just smile and tell me that things happened that first day just the way my father told it."

"They're all dorks. Some of them are lovable dorks but. . . . Actually, Mama dated a few guys that weren't dorks. After she divorced Daddie." Missie paused and thought for a moment before pronouncing sentence: "Men are either dorks or sleaze-balls." After a very short pause, she qualified her sentence: "Or both."

"Jake, the fellow at work isn't a dork, quite, and he isn't nearly a sleaze-ball, though he has a little of that in him and that little could grow bigger. Bayard is a dork. In a lot of ways, though not in the ways that truly count. I guess I prefer dorks."

"Some kinds of dorks, Mary. I know a lot of dorks that wouldn't get to first base with you and I'm sure you've met even more in college and in your job."

"Anddd," drawled Mary, "who do you think has reached first base with me?"

"You know, if you want to be technical, I don't know if anyone has reached first base with you. I don't even know how many guys have even tried to come up to bat. But. . . . Today. . . . I thought for a while you were about to give Bayard a pass right to first."

"You a baseball fan?"

"I play softball and I help coach my brother's little league team. I'm thinking of quitting though. Playing. I would still coach."

"Why?" When Missie remained silent for a few seconds, Mary first

turned her gaze back to the ceiling and then looked over and stroked her hair. “What’s the matter, Sweetheart?” surprising herself since she rarely used such terms of endearment with anyone but close relatives and boy-friends. Had she truly become an older sister to Missie?

There was still silence for a few seconds and then Missie moved her hands to not quite cup her adolescent breasts already larger than those of Mary. “I don’t like the way guys look at me when I run around. Or even the other girls. It’s not as bad as it is for Cheryl. She’s almost exactly the same age as me and she’s already a 38D. I’m only a 35...” She motioned back and forth and said, “B or C, depending on... whatever. I like it when guys look at me in a way that lets me know I’m pretty... Well, I’m not real pretty like Mama, but I’m good looking and I have a nice body. I don’t like it when men look at me... You know, the way a rapist or murderer looks at the woman who’s going to be his victim. Like she’s not human, just a toy, or a piece of meat, for him to play with.”

Mary suddenly felt her insides tense up as she wondered how children and teenagers had come to know so much about exploitation in a society supposedly so kind and gentle. After a moment of silence, Mary turned to Missie and smiled in a reassuring manner. “You’ve got a very nice body for a fourteen year-old girl. In fact, you have a body that many women in their twenties and thirties would die for.” In a tender voice, Mary added, “One of the reasons that everyone got so worried about you when you ran away is there are a lot of men who’d like to...” After a deep breath, Mary qualified herself: “Most men are nice and won’t do anything beyond smiling at you or even offering help.”

“Or they try to help me but run after me in a way that makes me think they’re about to rape me.”

“I already admitted Bayard was a dork. Very clumsy in some ways. Gracefully tender and gentle in other ways.”

Missie reached over to pat Mary on the shoulder, leading the older woman to realize why men were so fascinated by a girl on the verge of becoming fully a woman. You could never even guess from one second to the next whether she would be acting the part of girl or woman. She thought there was something in that insight that she wanted to talk to Bayard about...

Or maybe she could use that insight to tease him some more? She was wondering if she could re-active the fourteen year-old in herself. She was also wondering if that would be an attractive sight in a twenty-six year-old

woman.

“So, will I be invited to your wedding?”

Mary just shook her head. “Let me finish telling about my parents.”

“You mean how they met on that sidewalk, dated each other from then on through high school, and married a few months after graduating from high school and then they lived happily ever after?”

“Not quite. I told you it was my father who’d known immediately that he was going to marry my mother. She wasn’t at all taken with this fellow with the black plastic glasses and the legs that were way too long for the upper body they supported. Daddie also had hair that went in various directions, no matter how much Brylcreem he put on. He told me once he would have made a good porcupine. Mom dated several other fellows in high school. Dad was forced to date a couple of girls just because Mom always said no to him when he invited her to dances or church socials. But he almost always asked her first. And she said no and he would make the best of it while continuing to wait for her.”

“What do your grandparents say about this?”

“My father’s parents both died when I was young. It was her parents I was close to. Grammie just smiled when I asked her about my parents going together when they were young. Grandpa claims he knew they would get married from that first day he looked out the window to see if his little girl was okay and he saw a strange-looking kid emerge from the house next-door. Looking as if he’d never seen a girl before. The gawky lad ran up to introduce himself to a girl who was already his age but far more mature in most ways. All she wanted from this goofy creature was directions to the bakery and all he wanted was to offer his life and his adoration.” Mary winked and said, “Grandpa could embellish a story when he wished. He was the one who told me no self-respecting businessman would ever own a store, but only an emporium.”

“So, how did your father get to your mother?”

“He says he just wore her down. I think she realized how nice it would be to settle down with a fellow who was so in love with her. And that probably led to. . . Anyway, Daddie graduated from high school and went to work for Grandpa. Mom went to college for a year. Finally started dating him that year. They were married the summer after her freshman year of college and she never went back to school.” After a few seconds of silence, Mary took hold of Missie’s hands and gave them a gentle squeeze before telling her, “You can be in the wedding party, if you want. But I’m far from sure who

I'm going to marry. Actually, I'm not sure I'll be marrying anyone. Maybe I'll enter a convent."

"Are you a Catholic?"

"No. I think Buddhists have nuns. So, I'll become a Buddhist."

Missie smirked in a playful way before asking, "Can we go for brunch tomorrow? Just the two of us. It might be the last chance we'll have."

"You and TK both seem to think you won't be leaving until at least Monday afternoon. Maybe after that if you can't get a flight out right away. It isn't always possible to get last-minute seats on planes out of New York City."

"Yeah, but this will be the last chance for just the two of us. TK is one of my favorite people, but it won't be the same with the three of us as it is with the two of us."

Mary thought for a second or two before conceding, "It certainly won't," and then she said, "Sure, we'll go to a deli not far from here. They serve a real nice brunch. And, then, if you want, you can go down... Oh, damn it. I have to wait for Jake to return my call and let me know what our schedule is on a very important project at work." She looked over to Missie and pleaded, "It's boring to work on a Sunday afternoon. Since we like to talk together anyway, how would you like to go down with me and just sit while I work. It's nothing that will keep my mind too busy. Just grinding out some summaries of statistics about average employee benefits and average salaries and that sort of stuff."

"Mathematics?" And Missie shuddered.

With a grin on her face, Mary rose and went to do her laundry that she could free up as much time as possible over the next few days. She was grimacing soon enough. Not having had much experience with these sorts of acquisition and merger schedules, she could only think of the horrors of those college days leading up to finals or to the due-dates of important papers.

23 A Warrior of Corporate Capitalism

Jake stood in his living-room, looking about, impressed, as often he was, that so much had been done in a building which had once been decrepit, an unmaintained building seized for taxes and then sold for a low price to a man who had to commit to fixing it up, at whatever cost. The building had twelve units by the time they'd finished rebuilding it, though it had once been a single-family brownstone.

It was a small apartment, as were most in that part of Manhattan, but it was well-appointed. The very walls and floors and ceilings were fresh and new, flat and meeting at nearly perfect right angles. It was not that a building of man could long remain in this condition—perfection, however defined, was never permanent in a dynamic world, but this building had been in bad shape when the city had foreclosed on it a decade earlier.

The building had been gutted. Floors and walls and ceilings, all the plumbing and wiring, each and every door and window, had been removed to be replaced by nice, fresh components rolling out of the mills and factories of the world; some of those components had even come out of mills and factories of socialist or radically Marxist countries, only to be routed into the chaotically flowing stream of activity often, simplistically and euphemistically, labeled the free market.

It had all been to Jake's liking from the first time he'd walked by the gutted building while looking for an apartment in the upper west side of Manhattan. He'd lingered a few times:

- to see the well-organized crew of demolition experts and laborers work to tear out the insides of the building without damaging the structure or the structures of the neighboring buildings;

- to see the structure being inspected, shored up in a few places, and the new sub-flooring installed;
- to see the plumbers and electricians racing through the building installing so quickly and efficiently what was needed for modern standards of comfort and sanitation.

By the time the workmen were sealing off the building with new windows and doors to replace the plastic sheets, Jake had met the owner—an immigrant, a Russian Jew, who had come to the country without a penny and had built a good nest-egg, if not quite a fortune, with an electrical supply business. David Levin. A nice man, working hard to leave his grandchildren in a good position in life; his own three children were finished with college and law school; none of the three, not Devorah nor Simon nor Jacov, had been interested in Papa's business, and they were all working for large law firms in Chicago and Atlanta and Miami.

David, pronounced 'Dav-eed' by the man and his workers, had taken Jake on a couple of tours during the construction and had offered him a lease at favorable terms even before the real estate agent was turned loose in a hungry market. Knowing the building would eventually fall under rent-control laws, Jake would have been best off taking one of the large apartments on the upper two floors of the six story brick townhouse. He could have eventually sub-leased one of those apartments for a big profit; in fact, he could eventually pull off some such deal even with his smaller apartment: two small bed-rooms, a single bathroom, a very small kitchen, and another room—about 9'x10'—the location of most of the functions of living, not only eating and reading, but watching television and listening to recorded music.

The smaller apartment had more than suited his needs, and his anticipated needs before marrying and moving out to the suburbs.

Not expecting many overnight guests, Jake had set up his personal communications and information processing center in the second bed-room, which was right off the living-room, making it convenient for use as a den and office. It was his business room, and he kept it as such. When he was visiting with friends in the living-room, even when he was listening to Bach cantatas all by himself, the door to that office was kept shut. When he was working at home, he would shut himself inside that room, but didn't work

at home very often as he preferred long hours at the office to taking work home.

Jake had definitely decided not to take advantage of Mr Levin; he would not sub-let the apartment if he moved elsewhere in the area. Rather than taking a profit on monthly cash flow, he would turn the place back over to Mr Levin to let him rent it at the market rate before it returned to rent-control status. So far as Jake could tell, the rent-control laws were perhaps intended to help poor people but worked mostly to the advantage of middle-class and upper middle-class people who wanted cheap space in desirable parts of Manhattan, often enough while they owned houses or condos in New Jersey or Connecticut or Long Island.

Jake rose and fetched the universal remote control for his entertainment system. He looked at the television set, looked down at the control, and wondered why in the world he'd grabbed it. He wasn't much interested in watching television, hadn't been much of a TV watcher since going off to college. It seemed like such a waste of time to someone who enjoyed more active pursuits, in his personal life as well as his business life. Then, he remembered just how much his personal life had shrunk until. . .

Vague images of three women passed through his mind before he came to an awareness of his surroundings, the very same apartment which he had seen at various stages of reconstruction; Jake decided not to use television as a means to wash his brain clean of thoughts. Not sure what he should do, he looked around, paying close attention to the modest decorations in his living-room. There were three framed posters which were first put out as advertisements of a van Gogh exhibition. An 8x10 picture of his parents and all their children and their two grandchildren, Jake kneeling at the side of the his niece Megan. A picture of his parents on their thirtieth wedding anniversary and that reminded Jake that their fortieth was coming up in less than two years. The small clan was planning to gather, and Jake hoped he'd be settled and would be bringing a wife and perhaps even a baby to that one.

As his gaze shifted back to the starry, starry night, Jake reminded himself to call home the next day. His parents would be home from church by about noon or so, and he'd find out what was really going on with his mother's breast cancer. Then again, they had continually lied to him about some things, thinking it was for his own good since he was far away and couldn't do much but worry. But he was only five hours away by rented car, a little more if he took the train up to Springfield and rented a car

there.

And he couldn't forget that he had to conserve energy. He might be in for a week when there would be no time for. . .

It was nearly midnight and Jake had already set his alarm for five, though it would be a Sunday morning. He was planning to spend the morning doing laundry and cleaning the floors; he would also go out to do a little grocery shopping. He was getting ready for a week when there would be no time for. . .

Simply no time for anything but getting the job done.

His eyes panned the living-room:

- a walnut-veneered entertainment system holding a twenty-five inch television integrated with a stereo system with all the fixings: a tuner and a tape-player and a CD-player which could hold twenty-five discs;
- a small dinette set with only two chairs, the other two being used in his office, mostly to save space in his living-room;
- the couch he was sitting on, covered in some sort of greenish material with a texture that felt slightly itchy to bare skin;
- a small matching chair that didn't recline and was rarely used by Jake himself;
- two end-tables, there being no room for a coffee-table;
- two lamps, one standing on the floor near the dining-table and the other sitting on the end-table to the right-hand side of the sofa, which was the side Jake sat at.

Everything looked barely used, not brand-new for sure, but barely used. Jake's eyes turned to the closed door leading into the spare bedroom he used as an office. In there was a desk-top computer hooked up to the Internet, which he used mostly to access the VPN, the Virtual Private Network, used by the CMBG financial and legal departments. A cable modem sat next to the keyboard, allowing him to see the status of his connection to the Net. A docking station was networked into that desk-top, though he really didn't go on the Net very often using his lap-top, certainly not with his desk-top sitting there with a high-resolution nineteen-inch LCD monitor. To the far left of the wide table holding those two computer stations, there

was a small stand, specialized for holding a printer and it, in fact, held a multi-purpose printer, usable as a fax-machine or a copier.

Besides that desk holding his computer, there was a smaller desk in the far corner, holding the base-station for his mobile phone, though the hand-set was usually sitting on the entertainment center, just in front of the rarely used television set. There were also early-generation models of beepers, one going back to his high school days when he'd had absolutely no need for it. And cell-phones of various generations. Jake had always been aware of the importance of quick communication in the field where he was headed: acquisitions and divestures, liquidations and start-ups. Well before he needed to be constantly in touch, he had bought a cell-phone from his meager savings, knowing he would be no more than playing around with it. In fact, that had been back when cell-phones were just coming into use with doctors and utility lines-men and drug-dealers. And now he had a new service with connections to the Net, a flat fee per month for unlimited usage but the connection was shaky and not accepted at very many sites on the World Wide Web, but that mattered little to Jake, mostly because he was still learning and playing around with new technology that still had a lot of rough edges, but also because he didn't plan to be in any field where he would be dealing much in publicly available information.

Jake came to a greater awareness of his immediate surroundings, to the point where he felt a hard, plastic object in his right hand. Looking down, he saw the remote control which could hook him up to the Internet through the fiber-optic cable coming into his living-room. He could surf parts of the net even on his television and the cable went on, behind the wall board and in a conduit installed when the building was being reconstructed. . .

On went that cable to his computer in the extra bedroom he used as an office. And there could he cruise the net in ways beyond the limited capabilities of the circuitry built into his television, which after all had cost about a third as much as his desktop computer, a fourth as much as his lap-top computer.

And none of it was more than a snapshot of modern technology which was a film being played at a high rate of speed. And that rate was increasing rapidly, especially in electronics and optics. Another year and these toys would all have to be replaced if Jake were to enjoy the additional features sure to be offered to those who wished to enjoy those additional features.

That was a disorienting aspect of modern life. Exhilarating much of the time, but it could also throw a person off-balance.

With the unleashing of creative entrepreneurial energies, products were quickly generated to take care of needs and desires people hadn't even been aware of the prior year.

It was certainly clear to Jake that the great advance of the marketplace had made modern lives a bit less short, quite a bit less nasty—at least when it came to famines and diseases. He also knew that a lot of the basic needs had been well satisfied by merchants merely moving about goods which were being produced before the Industrial Revolution; the growth in material well-being that defined the modern era had largely begun before the rapid development of modern technology. Everyone's well-being had been increased just by the increased trade between regions, northern Europe sending ores and sometimes processed metals to the Mediterranean in return for warm-climate food-stuffs or some luxurious products of the advanced societies in Italy and Greece and the Mideast. Those improvements in the movement of goods, as well as improvements in methods of insuring and financing those movements had meant a great deal to the initial increase in living-standards in recent centuries. As a money-man, Jake didn't feel himself to be any sort of junior partner to engineers or other technicians in the making of a prosperous new world.

Not that Jake would have ever denied the great worth of the contributions of engineers and technicians, but, even then, many of the most important technological improvements had involved the less prestigious sorts of engineering work. Sewers and reservoirs, all the pipes running beneath the streets of every city and nearly every town in the United States, had led to much of the increase in life-span. A man could even argue that the increase in life-span and living conditions brought about by medicine was pretty small compared to that brought about by those clean-water and waste-removal systems.

But it was the merchants and the advertising men, the bankers and the factory managers, who pulled together all the efforts, making the world a better place for men and women and children. They did it by building up the marketplace that one group of men might trade their surplus machinery for foods and medicine. Even doctors and scholars could sell their services in that vast and chaotic bazaar which had been built in the modern world. And it all depended upon men having the freedom to move in and out of that marketplace as well as the freedom to move about the marketplace selling their goods for the best deal they could negotiate.

Men might move with a great deal of freedom through the marketplace, along the pathways and streets, into and out of stores—mostly needing to have no contact with the factories lying behind those stores. At the same time, it took only a little acquaintance with that marketplace and with the history of its construction to realize that it had been men who had put up those factories and stores, who had laid those asphalt roads and concrete walkways. It had been men who had walled in the entire marketplace that men born into the wilderness and adapted to its ways could be kept out.

Jake shook himself from the vision which had come upon him. He looked down at the remote-control in his hand and pressed a button, exerted the least of efforts, and clanging chords came on from a song of Classical Rock-and-roll, a song he recognized but couldn't name, but he thought it was by that old-time group Journey. He pressed another button and music more soothing came on, more guitar chords but this time: quiet jazz. Was it George Benson playing or maybe someone more up-and-coming and less established? He thought he recognized this tune as well, but also could not name it.

As he lay down on his couch to rest his brain and his eyes, Jake thought it would be nice to be in a concert hall listening to a choir singing a Bach cantata, but he didn't have the energy to go out and had no one to go out with. . .

No, he didn't have anyone to be with at just that time, but he would soon be on a date with Charlotte, Kirsten had seemed to invite a date though they'd not set one for sure, and Mary. . .

Well, it didn't seem that he and Mary were made for each other, at least not in this world. . .

But he thought she was wonderful in her own way and he might have pursued her under other circumstances. He confirmed to himself what he'd already known: he and Mary would be good friends but would have no romance at all. That would also make things easier at work. . .

Though a romance with Kirsten could cause all sorts of interesting problems and opportunities. . .

Problems and opportunities.

Sometimes it was hard to tell them apart and perhaps situations were often both at once.

* * * * *

Jake awoke from his nap and went into his den to check the phone and to see if Ziggy or Mr Thornsby had called. The only call had been from Mary Pride. He hesitated while he wondered if her call was personal or business. And then he pressed the magical button which returned her call.

A few moments later, Jake heard Mary explain, "I had called just to let you know I've got a surprise visitor. I can still go in tomorrow for a few hours to do my part on this Baxton deal, but I can't really spend the entire day."

Jake assured her, "That's all right. A couple of hours should be sufficient," though he'd considered the possibility of a long day followed by an invitation to a quiet meal, perhaps at his apartment. If she were to be a friend, well. . . He felt the need to talk to someone, someone he could trust, and someone free of the wrong sorts of possible entanglements.

"So, when do you want me to be there?"

"Anytime you wish. I'll be in early, after I run and do my laundry. By nine, I'll have assembled a list of the information I need and I'll just put it on your desk before you get there. Pretty simple and straightforward stuff. Mr Thornsby confirmed that one of the Baxtons is worried we're going to fire half the employees and leave their children to starve, but, as you know, when you buy an industrial distributor like Baxton, it's really the employees and their relationships and contacts that you're buying. Even when there are surplus workers, you do what you can to cut down on the workforce by natural attrition and you do what you can to provide outplacement services for those workers who have to be let go."

Mary remained silent.

After a longish pause, Jake spoke out in a hearty voice, "Well, give me a buzz when you get to your desk. I'll bring you down a cup of coffee and answer any questions you might have about where we're headed."

* * * * *

Having napped for a couple of hours in the evening, Jake slept in fits and starts, falling away from strange lines of pseudo-rational thought into dreams punctuated occasionally by images of that skinny, sickly-looking hooker. . .

The very image brought a sense of hot disgust and. . .

Without another thought, Jake threw aside the comforter and tried to settle down with just the sheet and blanket over him. Lying on his back,

he felt the muscles in the small of his back aching as if he'd been in bed too long. Turning his head, he could read the time on his bedside clock: 5:18. Just about the time he'd planned on getting up, but he was now thinking of sleeping in for another hour. He decided to do it and to do his best to turn his thoughts and dreams from that skinny little streetwalker. He knew the poor woman had great problems, even if she might have brought them down upon herself, but there wasn't anything Jake could do to help her and worrying wasn't going to do anyone any good

After turning over onto his left side, Jake pulled his extra pillows towards him. As a rule, he used them only for propping himself up when he was reading in bed, but now he nestled up against two of them, using them to sandwich his right arm. Burying his face into the crack between those pillows and the one he'd been using all night, he did his best to get back to sleep, not letting his tongue move, not allowing himself to follow trains of thought or streams of images.

He had rolled over onto his back and was drifting away to sleep when he saw the little, blonde slut standing in the corner of his room. She was holding out her hand, hoping for someone to give her something. . .

Money?

Friendship?

A little sympathy?

Jake told himself that she could always decide to clean up her act and then it wouldn't be so hard for her to have a decent life in the United States. There were plenty of opportunities at every level and anyone who needed a start could always get help, from private or government agencies. The United States was still largely secure, insulated by the hard work and discipline of its citizens from most of the problems with the terrorists, the related possibility of war in the Mideast, the problems caused by fiscally irresponsible South American leaders, the bloody wars and erratic economic performance of Africa, the sheer inscrutability of those damned Reds in China, the instability in former republics of the USSR—threatening a return of the KGB or a similar organization. . .

Now Jake was awake and wondering why he was all of a sudden producing a laundry list of the problems caused when people didn't just settle down to the hard but rewarding work of building factories and houses and cars and computers, of providing desired services in transportation and lodging and entertainment. Well, he knew why people acted in such irrational ways even if he didn't understand. They were acting out the grievances, imag-

ined or real, from past generations, sometimes problems remembered from a thousand years before.

He couldn't fully understand why people couldn't let by-gones be by-gones. The peoples who had come to the United States had done that. Russian Jews were willing to support peaceful relationships with a country that treated their ancestors so badly for many centuries. Even the Vietnamese refugees were willing to support, however weakly in many cases, normalization of relationships with Viet Nam. The Cubans were a problem, to be sure. . .

Life was not fair, the world was often filled with injustice though the modern world had at least greatly muted the degree and frequency of acts of injustice so that hard-working people could lead lives largely protected from outright tyranny; they could protect their property and thus themselves and their children. And the forms of injustice which survived were those which could often be overcome with a lot of sweat and a little bit of luck.

Jake rolled over again and made a deliberate effort not to follow up on any lines of thought, no matter how important or interesting.

He woke up and saw it was half past six; he'd overslept, had allowed himself to oversleep, but it was now time to rise and prepare himself for the tasks which confronted him—to his great pleasure. Jake was still a little confused from his nightmares and moral monologues, but he was regaining his focus. There was work to be done on the Baxton acquisition and a good performance would lead to a prominent role in other important and interesting projects.

Jake went into the bathroom and emptied his bowels and bladder as if in anticipation of immediately entering battle. Not idle his mind: Jake was thinking through his role in what was to happen. Not quite what he would have liked—he felt himself nearly ready to be out front on these sorts of efforts. Given the small size of the Baxton acquisition, it was a little disappointing that he had not been given a bigger public role; he felt he should have at least been meeting with the Baxton people along with Mr Thornsby. From the beginning and not just as the deal was being finalized.

Jake put on his running shorts and a light T-shirt and took his laundry down and put on two loads, figuring he would be the only one using the washing machines and driers that early on a Sunday. Once he was back in his apartment, he put on an unlined running suit and went down to the sidewalk where he used the steps and a utility pole to do a short stretching routine before setting off at a gentle, warm-up pace.

Focused he seemed to be and he used his running to focus himself more intensely, breathing out upon every other strike of his right foot. Having tied himself to that internal rhythm, Jake increased his breathing rate and his foot-pace in synch, though he had planned to take an easy run.

Focused he was. It wasn't just a matter of necessity—Jake liked to be focused and usually he was, but it took all his will-power to keep his attention on his run, tired as he was from many distracting thoughts the night before, from many distressing images that had run through his sleepy and drowsy mind. About two miles out, Jake started pushing himself until he was panting for breath, until his thighs were beginning to ache.

He pushed harder, heading down below a seven minute a mile pace for a while before being forced to pull back. It wasn't the same as when he was living in Palo Alto and running all year round, thirty miles a week even with his heavy work-load at school.

Focus was needed. Clear the mind of that hooker and all the other moral and social problems that were beyond his control. Jake was trying hard to do his job without becoming hard of heart; he knew he'd produced analyses that had led to some people losing their jobs, to others having their careers totally destroyed. He'd been involved in moving hundreds of jobs at a time from vulnerable communities, and that had hurt; Jake himself having grown up in Athol, an economically troubled town. A town with lots of social problems as well. What was the relationship? Unlike many who were willing to claim partial credit for the raising of living standards, Jake couldn't—in his honest moments—deny a share of the blame for the drop in living standards for some individuals or localities. Sure, a person could just claim that the global increase in living standards justified all individual and local suffering, but Jake wasn't the person to take credit for the good and refuse the blame for the bad. He was convinced strongly that the good he'd helped to bring about had far outweighed the bad results for some individuals.

So it was that he had a moral reason, and not just selfish reasons, to remain focused; he had regained much focus when he was running along Central Park South, heading west, heading for the stretch he would walk while cooling down. The distracting buzz of ideas was dying away.

Focus. Jake had spent much of his life moving to an ever more disciplined focus upon what was important in life. His rigorous training in business school had done much to inculcate in him a respect for personal discipline when the stakes were high. Just like boot camp or other training centers for

warriors, the elite business schools of the modern West were dedicated to the breaking down and rebuilding of the inner person. Exhaustion played a very important part in all of it and Jake was prepared, mentally and emotionally, for the possibility of a stretch of sleepless nights if something went wrong, or very right, during the Baxton acquisition, for he was nearly certain that CMBG was going to be successful in its acquisition of Baxton.

He'd spent sleepless nights during his two years at Stanford. He'd been driven to the point of giving up. But that was something he hadn't done, not even when he'd seen some students more talented than himself break down and leave. One of them had decided to return to his mother's real estate business and to get an MBA at a local college with lesser demands. The other had just disappeared without leaving behind so much as a rumor.

Exhaustion. Once broken down, a warrior in training for the investment banking firms of Wall Street could be shown that he could rebuild himself, could pull himself up by his own bootstraps even when he found himself in the midst of a crumbling financial empire.

Students at the smaller business schools, and certainly those in evening schools, learned finance and accounting and organizational theories. The students at the elite business schools studied themselves, learned how they performed under extreme pressure, learned how to perform better—or else they dropped out in one way or another. Much the same was true not only of the budding lawyers at the top law schools but also of the Army Ranger candidates being starved and brutalized in the backwoods of Florida that they might lose their inhibitions and learn to eat live frogs to keep themselves alive when they were completely on their own, isolated from any support from the large warrior bands to which they belonged.

How far could the analogy be pushed? Jake himself didn't know, though he'd come to realize the deeper purposes behind his elite education when he became friendly with an ex-Ranger at the school of business at Stanford. That Ranger had been through the process before, in boot camp and in paratrooper school and then in Ranger school, and then again in business school.

As he came to edge of Central Park and slowed to a walk, Jake smiled at such a conceit:

a warrior of corporate capitalism.

* * * * *

Jake headed out of his bedroom, dressed for off-work day in the office. He had put on tan slacks and the first sports-shirt that he had seen after opening his closet. All of his sports-shirts were chosen to look good with tan slacks. He'd long ago decided that it was possible to dress nicely without making your life too complicated and on busy days he reaped the rewards of a rational decision. He was just heading into his kitchenette to grab a bowl of cereal when the phone rang, not the cell-phone already hanging from his belt but his apartment phone.

Wondering who might be calling him quite this early on Sunday morning, Jake picked up the hand-set to hear the familiar voice of Mr Thornsby's most trusted senior vice-president: "Jake, this is Ziggy Robinson."

"How could you be sure I'd be the one picking up the phone? Does everyone know how boring my personal life is right now?"

Ziggy laughed, but went right on to business: "I just got off the phone with Ev, Ev Thornsby. He's going into his meeting as if everything were copesetic but we may have a big problem. You've got to keep this one strictly confidential, but you may be in on a big defense effort soon." Jake's heart was already racing. He had risen to the balls of his feet, ready to dash off where necessary, but then he settled to a flatter posture, aware he would need to be better balanced to react and move backwards or forwards, left or right. "I've been looking over some of the recent transactions involving our stock, past few days or so, following up on some of the suspicious but small-scale patterns we noticed back on Wednesday... There's not a real clear pattern but I've got a nose for these sorts of things." Ziggy Robinson never let a conversation go for long without assuring people: "I developed an instinct for incoming trouble during my two tours of duty as a Marine fighter pilot, and I honed that instinct for the jungles of Wall Street during my five years at Corley, Doyle, and Megglesworth. I raided several big companies myself, always for profit. Sometimes very, very big profits." Ziggy chuckled and then said, "Until we know what's going on, Ev is going to play the game with Baxton, and we want you to do the same. You meeting that young lady from personnel to put together some info?"

"She's going to just put together some basic information for me and I'll prepare Mr Thornsby's presentation. I was expecting him to call, but perhaps he won't if he's already talked to you."

"He might well call you a little later on your cell-phone to see how things are progressing. You'll probably be at the office by then. He's going over to the house of Tom Baxton, the Chairman of the Board of Baxton. I've

been to Tom's house before. A number of years back when I did a small bonds placement for them. Tom's brunches are casual and long and involve not just eating but also drinks out in the sun-room. The pool-side if you visit him during the warmer months. Ev won't be out of there before two or three this afternoon."

"Well, I'll be the office in another hour or so and I might be there for the whole day."

A pause and then Ziggy's hearty, battle-preparation voice boomed out: "So, buddy, hold your cards close to the vest, but be ready to engage in some sort of combat, just in case there is a raider out there, looking at us looking at Baxton. If he even knows we're looking at Baxton."

"You got my cell-phone number, Ziggy? It'll be a more certain way to get hold of me throughout the day. I'll keep my holster right at my side, just like a gunfighter from a John Wayne movie."

Ziggy laughed and assured him, "I surely do have your cell-phone number, buddy. It's in my black book of important numbers." That made Jake feel good. Ziggy, though second to Ev Thornsby, was already a likely candidate himself for a chief executive spot at some company if the opportunity were not opened for him at CMBG, and most people thought him likely to be the next CEO of CMBG and GRF. Mr Thornsby was not a good candidate since he was older than Mr Osborne. No, it was Ziggy who was the leading candidate in the next generation of GRF executives, and he was a man of formidable reputation though only in his early forties. He was known to be especially good at this sort of business, fighting off a predator or being himself a predator, a good man to have at your side when you went to the mattresses as they'd said in the old gangster movies.

"Is there anything specific I should do for now, Ziggy?"

"Just put on your thinking cap and be prepared to spend a few sleepless nights fighting to eat or maybe to avoid being eaten. It's no secret that you're considered a better strategist than anyone in the company except for me. Some might say Ev, but he's more the salesman and corporate politician. He's going to be relying on you and me if this comes down to a fight."

As he hung up the phone, the proud corporate warrior was wondering how a live frog would taste as it squirmed its way down his throat.

24 Moving Towards Consummation

Mary rose early on Sunday to do some light cleaning before heading out to brunch with Missie. She was also running over various scenarios for Baxton in her mind, thinking it would not prove to be an overly brutal acquisition though she knew there would be some lay-offs. While she was strolling through her small apartment, dusting off the table-tops, she decided it would be worth her while to look at the age distribution of Baxton employees. If there was even a small bulge approaching retirement, she might be able to get most of the necessary drop in the workforce.

She'd have also to look at normal employee turnover rates but. . .

With luck, she might be able to work out a way to trim the workforce without so much as a single person being laid-off.

She smiled into an empty room, wondering what the future would bring but now convinced that she would not be forced to play a role in acts she considered despicable. Then again, though she had decided that certain acts of corporate efficiency were despicable, she'd also realized that even Jake was far from being evil, though she wasn't yet sure if he were a morally good person in a positive sense.

* * * * *

Just before eleven, Mary and Missie headed out for brunch.

"It'll be a quick one, Missie."

"I know. You have to go into the office. Just like Mama a lot of the time. Hardly leaves time for a civilized brunch."

"No, and weekend brunch is one of the few times that New Yorkers are very leisurely, though you'll see a few that can't get out of weekday mode.

They'll bolt everything down, maybe even a second plate and will be gone in half an hour."

"Mama wouldn't let people like that in her house."

"I don't blame her. Even in a tolerant age, every civilized household should have some standards."

The two women reached the corner and turned south towards the deli when Mary, seeing the sidewalk was empty, stopped Missie and turned her so that they faced each other. Missie looked a little worried.

"One thing really bothers me about all this, Missie. You're so mature in so many ways. You even understand a lot about men and about relationships with men. And, yet, running away like you did was..."

Missie sighed and said, "Be honest. Be brutal. Just be quick."

The melodramatic tone, the Southern belle expression upon her face, the posture of defenselessness before a cruel world, threw Mary for just a second before she said, "What you did was both immature and dumb."

With a shrug and a wave of the hand, Missie said, "It's in the blood," and turned to go on.

Mary took hold of her again and asked, "Could you please explain a little?"

"Mama ran away on Papa several times. Once, when I was about eleven, she disappeared for nearly a week."

"But she's a career woman with a responsible job."

"Oh, she scheduled a vacation week and just kept it a secret from me and Papa. My two brothers were too young to be much involved in such matters though they cried a little for their Mama. Papa found out what she'd done late that night when he woke Mama's secretary up at home. Not a phone-call, he was banging on her door because they weren't answering the phone. Meanwhile, some of Papa's hunting buddies were combing the woods behind our house with a team of hounds. Later on, Papa used her credit-card bills to put together some sordid tale of a week spent on the Gold Coast of Alabama, afternoons in spas which catered to the needs of her body and soul..." Missie petered out and then said, "You get the picture."

"And she didn't tell your father or you where she was going?"

"That would have defeated her purpose."

"Which was?"

"To make us worry and to force us to show her we loved her..." Missie started blushing and she turned to walk on. This time, Mary let her go.

* * * * *

The phone was ringing when Mary and Missie entered the apartment after spending a good four hours at the office while Jake tweaked and re-tweaked each and every slide and graph for Mr Thornsby's presentation.

In a voice as wilted as she felt, Mary picked up the hand-set to her phone and said, "Hello," and no more.

It was with a mixture of feelings that she heard Bayard shyly say, "Hi, Mary. You don't sound so good."

"I'm tired. Had to work all afternoon on a... special project."

"Well, I, uh... I mean... I know we weren't supposed to get together until Friday, but..." She heard silence on Bayard's end of the line. "I'm in the general area. I was kind of hoping to visit... Just for a short while..."

There was just a short pause while Mary thought about how tired she was, how confused she was about where she wanted to go in life. And then she did her best to pleasantly invite him: "Come on by. Missie and I just got home and we're going to dress down to sweats and just hang out, letting our brains decay for a while."

"Sounds like fun. I'll be around in about a quarter of an hour... If that's not too soon..."

"That's fine. If you pass a grocery store, why don't you bring up something real easy to cook, like hot dogs or a frozen pizza."

Bayard laughed in a funny way and then Mary heard that laugh drift off. She almost thought he would change his mind and not come up, but he said, "I'll be there with something easy to cook."

* * * * *

Bayard and Mary stood smiling weakly at each other after she'd opened the door for him. And then she slowly moved out of the way and waved him in. When he'd come in and was standing in front of her, his wool-cap in hand and a sheepish grin on his face, Mary laughed. Then, feeling a little lighter in mood, she apologized, "I'm sorry for my bad manners. It's just that I'm awfully tired."

Plainly showing his reluctance, Bayard offered, "I'll just go if you wish," but she shook her head and waved him into the apartment.

Missie's voice, dripping with boredom, sounded out as she entered the living-room: "Anyone mind if I turn on the television?"

And Bayard handed the bag to Mary. "Hot dogs and some onion rolls. And some cheeses and some corned beef in case..."

In a voice suggesting martyrdom, Missie told them, "You two look like you're both tired. Why don't I skip the television for now. I'll go cook the hot dogs and you can sit down and rest. Talk if you want. You won't disturb me." With that, she rose from the couch and took the bag from Mary's hand.

A short while later, the three of them were sitting in Mary's living-room, the television set on low-volume to a music video station. Missie sat next to Mary on the love-seat so she could have a good view of some young blonde creature who was completely unknown to Mary though she'd heard Missie call her a 'diva', a title which Mary thought should be reserved for truly talented and hard-working singers who'd shown their stuff over a good period of time. Dame Kiri te Kenawa for sure. Also Beverly Sills and Dawn Upshaw. Mary would have extended the list to the likes of Judi Garland and Ella Fitzgerald and Charlotte Church, but... She looked at the screen to see the young woman's thumbs partially opening the waist of shorts which didn't quite cover her pubic region to begin with. And that leather get-up looked like beachwear for the S & M crowd. Mary shook her head and turned to speak to Bayard behind the head of Missie who was leaning forward as she concentrated on every move and every word. "Do you intend to just read for a while?"

"I have a lot of background reading to catch up on, a lot of observing to do, and then..." His voice just drifted off and Mary felt sorry for him though she didn't really think he deserved that sort of patronizing attitude. He was confused and had perhaps messed up a year or two of his life, but that wasn't exactly a disaster. She had friends who'd gone off drifting through India or Europe for a year or more, some who'd gone to the Peace Corps or a religious mission for a period and then had drifted around. One of those friends was now in her last year at Harvard Law School, though she wouldn't have wished that on Bayard. She motioned towards the kitchen and then rose to follow him.

Soon, she had set the kettle to boil and had taken a seat across from him at the table. "Have you thought about returning home after a stay in New York City?"

"I plan to head back eventually, maybe after I've got something firm to write about."

"No, I mean, have you thought about heading back fairly soon. A couple

of months observation in New York City might be all you want for now. I've been thinking lately of heading for the boondocks and sooner rather than later." Mary had spoken without thinking too much of what she was saying, the proposition she was implying, but she didn't feel at all embarrassed or upset that it had come out so bluntly; in truth had she recovered a bit of her energy and her confidence.

Bayard's face wore an odd and confused smile for a few seconds before he seemed to gain control of himself. He asked, "Would you like to go up for a visit to my home-town in a couple of weeks? Mom would put you up in the guest-room. I mean, there would be no pressure to... you know."

Mary smiled and told him, "I wouldn't expect any pressure from you unless I invited it. And I would love to take a vacation in Vermont, but the timing might be bad. I certainly don't want to put it off too long. I'm thinking about being back in New England for at least part of the winter, and it'd be lovely to be north for Christmas even if I still have to return to New York City to finish up this project." She was now sure that she wanted to be part of the Baxton acquisition right up to the point where she could set in place a plan to trim employee levels with a minimal number of lay-offs.

25 Another Unwrinkled Woman Arrives

Mary was not herself sure how it had happened, but TK was on her way from the airport and Jake and Bayard were both in her apartment—sitting at the kitchen table and drinking beer. To her amusement, though she'd expected no less, the two men had almost immediately found their way to a heated but polite discussion about corporations. She left them in the kitchen while she headed down to the laundry-room to fetch the linens to be used by whomever slept on the couch. Fifteen minutes later, she returned and heard Jake protest, "Without corporations, we would be a far less prosperous people. . ."

"Sure, if prosperity includes plastic gizmos and sleazy, demoralizing, degrading entertainment."

"That doesn't argue against corporations. It argues against freedom of choice. There's no one going around and turning people's television sets on to all that crap. People want to watch that sort of stuff and someone comes around to supply it. Sad in certain ways, but if it's so bad as to endanger human society, you better realize you aren't arguing against Sony, you're arguing against the Bill of Rights."

Bayard sat back and contemplated something. Mary wondered if he were more concerned about the truth in Jake's statement or the errors. At least, she was beginning to suspect that there was a partial truth taken out of context in the general arguments Jake and many others used for a corporatized economy. She thought it might be interesting to see if Bayard really did have a similar opinion, but she decided not to join in the discussion. Instead, she rose to make a salsa from the fresh ingredients she'd bought at the farmer's market just that morning. She was at work slicing tomatoes when Missie came in, opened a bag of tortilla chips and poured them into

a bowl. Next, she prepared a bag of potato chips and, bowls in hand, she walked out of the room without paying any attention to the adults in the kitchen. Mary smiled, knowing how much Missie was looking forward to seeing her cousin.

Nearly as soon as Missie had disappeared, Mary heard Bayard speak quietly and with little confidence: “But, the level of the exploitation and the way it’s increasing, pushing certain despicable ideas into the heads of the children. . . . Even the babies who happen to be in the room when someone is watching some new way to rip a human body to pieces, or a revelation of some new form of serial degradation.” With the tone of someone who’d presented an unimpeachable argument, Bayard concluded, “Morality is not exactly a top priority of corporate leaders. Or government leaders.”

“Or church leaders. Or academic leaders. Or cultural leaders. Or parents and grandparents for that matter. It might be that our traditional institutions have gone as rotten as any of the new-fangled corporations.” Jake’s voice had taken on that cocksure, young-professor tone that annoyed Mary, but it was something she’d been able to ignore so far in their short friendship. The two men grew quiet for a while, sipping on their beers and suddenly talking casually about. . . .

“Are you two talking about fishing?”

When Mary turned, she saw Jake shrug and then take another sip of his beer. Bayard asked, “You want us to go back to talking about economics?”

Mary said, “No,” and winked at Jake as she claimed, “Talk about night-crawlers is much more pleasing to a girl than talk about corporate executives.”

“Yeah, I can see how a lot of people would feel that way. I might feel that way myself, someday, though I’m still having fun doing all these stupid corporate tricks.”

The buzzer had sounded when Jake was speaking and Missie who’d come in to fuss around with preparations for her cousin ran out of the kitchen towards the speaker and the door-control button. Mary heard her young friend asking, “Is that you, TK?” and she put the salsa into a couple of bowls which she picked up as she walked back into the kitchen.

The apartment door was open when Mary arrived in the living-room and she could hear Missie running down the stairs. A minute later, an attractive and smiling young woman appeared in the doorway alongside Missie who carrying a small suitcase. Breathlessly did Missie make the introductions; “This is TK,” she announced and then, “This is Mary,” and Mary and TK

exchanged smiles. “This is Jake and that’s Bayard” without quite making clear, so far as Mary could tell, which was which. TK shook hands with the two men without saying their names.

And Mary stepped forward to say, “Let me hang up your coat and you can take a seat while one of these fine gentlemen fetches you a drink.”

And it was only a minute or two before Mary was seated on the floor, her back against the wall near the window. TK and Missie were on the couch with Bayard sitting awkwardly on the floor beside TK’s end of the small couch. Jake had taken a seat in the middle of the floor and was soon enough embroiled in some sort of conversation with TK about the annoyances of flying, with Missie putting in her two cents when she could. Mary was quite content to listen and to observe, though she felt guilty at not doing something to get Bayard involved in the social flow around him.

A pleasant laugh, a tinkling sound, split the air as it broke down into a giggle and then was joined by a similar laugh which broke down into a similar giggle. First Missie and then TK had looked over to see the expression upon Bayard’s face.

“I’ve seen that face before,” stated Missie when she stopped giggling for a few seconds.

Together Missie and TK said, “Daddy,” before TK explained, “Hers and mine both.”

* * * * *

Wednesday came and Mary was worn out. The good-by scene at the airport on Monday evening had done even more damage than the twelve hour work-days on Monday and Tuesday. That scene had been a killer and a revelation to Mary who’d not realized just how fond she’d been of Missie after knowing her for such a short time.

TK and Missie and Mary had cried and hugged, while Bayard had stood five feet away, shuffling his feet and looking as if he wished he could also join in the crying. Or at least the hugging. He had been surprisingly at ease during the cab-ride back to Manhattan, putting his arm around Mary’s shoulders and then he’d stayed with her at her apartment for an hour or two before he’d left quietly, almost as if he were suspecting she was thinking about inviting him to stay the night. Frustration, though not sexual in the itching way, had been added to her exhaustion.

So it was that Mary was a little dazed when she walked into a small coffee-shop near the CMBG building. As she went up to the counter to order, a man turned around, a couple of coffees in his hands. It was Jake, but he looked past Mary, a frightening expression on his face. Frightening and, she was forced to admit, fascinating to the point of arousing. She exclaimed a quiet, "Hello, Jake," and he hesitated, in mid-stride, to mutter some sort of greeting.

He was focused. He had vaguely referred to the importance of focus a couple of times over the past few days. She hadn't understood fully what he'd been saying, and he had—in fact, been implying more than saying, but she'd gotten the drift: a dedicated businessman was much like a warrior or athlete in focusing intently upon both his goals and his immediate actions. He had spoken a little about Samurai attitudes and about Zen views of reality and it had all seemed a bit of a mish-mash to Mary, but she had found herself comparing Jake's focus to Bayard's quietly stubborn courage and had seen enough of a similarity to fascinate her. She had decided to take on a psychology field project of sorts: she would observe and compare the two men, especially when they interacted with each other.

"Can I help you, lady?"

Mary looked over to see a grizzled man of about sixty, already needing a shave at eight—but he'd probably been up for a good number of hours already. He was forcing a smile and she did her best to smile pleasantly at him as she replied, "I think I need someone to explain people to me."

There was a pause and then the man chuckled and gave a more honest smile bordering on a grin. "We don't have that on the menu, Lady. If we did, I'd be the first to order it. You should see my granddaughter. She's got five or six rings in each ear, a couple through one of her nostrils, and she's talking about getting one through her lip. I don't know where they're going to put those damned things next, but she's starting to look like one of those people in Bora Bora." He sighed and said, "My father walked more than five hundred miles on foot to get out of Sofia so he'd have a chance for a better life in a civilized country—for himself and for his children, and look at what's happening. Half the children in this country are looking like savages made up for the Saturday night dance in the village square."

Mary simply nodded and told him, "It is getting pretty bad, but it will probably all work out. She'll settle down soon enough and be a mother herself..." The man sighed again and, hearing the door open to admit another customer, Mary ordered, "Could I have an egg bagel with butter?"

The man stayed at the counter and she, in an absent-minded manner, added, “And a tea with just a touch of milk.”

A woman who’d walked out of a back-room set to work on Mary’s order even as the man asked in a polite bark, “What will you have, Sir?”

A heavy-set black man who looked as tired as the coffee-shop counter-man stepped up and said, “Onion bagel with cream-cheese and a large black coffee.”

Mary looked over at him, overcoming her acquired New York City instincts and she asked, “Al?” not sure if it really was. . .

The man looked over and smiled pleasantly through his exhaustion. “Ms Pride. How are you doing this fine morning?”

“A little tired. Been working hard at the same time I had some out-of-town visitors.”

“Yes, I know a little bit about what you’re going through at work. I’ve been talking to Mr Osborne about the ongoing projects at your company.”

Mary was confused for a second or two. After he’d retired as a New York City detective, he’d interviewed. . .

“You know, Ms Pride, sometimes I wish I’d taken that position as head of building security at CMBG. The hours would have been bad enough, but with an independent consulting firm, I’ve got three or four major bosses who have me on retainer plus a dozen or more companies who have me do specific projects on an ongoing basis.” The counterman set a bag down and nodded at Mary; she stepped forward to hand him a five.

A moment later, she’d stepped back, coins in hand and turned to Al to say good-bye, but he asked her, “Why don’t you wait just a second, Ms Pride? I’m going up to talk to Mr Simpson on my way up to Mr Osborne’s office. I’ll walk you up to your cubicle.” He laughed and said, “I still remember that cubicle. I had more than a little bit of trouble fitting my six foot tall and three hundred pound body into that small space.”

She smiled at the memory of the man squeezed in the chair in her cubicle while she was giving him the routine spiel about benefits. It had been more a time-killer than anything else as they had been waiting for the fellow who was to interview Al Comstock, retired detective and, at that time—but apparently no longer, a person very much unknown to anyone inside of CMBG; the head of security for CMBG’s aerospace division had been flying in from Dallas and he had been delayed at the airport.

“I’ll bet you’ve been awfully busy since. . .”

“Yes, and I’m sure I’ll be busy for the foreseeable future.” He stopped

talking as the counterman set down another bag. Al handed over some money, received some change, and then turned to walk out with Mary Pride who was feeling like a little girl alongside this large and friendly man. Once outside, he said, "If you have a minute to shoot the breeze, we can go up to your department. I'm sure Mr Simpson isn't there yet." Mary smiled. Her boss was very punctual, rarely early and never late, which was remarkable given that he rode in a ways on the Long Island Railroad. You could almost set your clock to 8:30 at the sight of Mr Simpson walking into his corner office.

Arriving at the seventh floor, Mary turned away from the direction of her cubicle and led Al towards an informal meeting room that was used by the staff for coffee-breaks and even an occasional game of bridge at lunch-time. They settled in at one of the three small tables set up and prepared to eat their small breakfasts.

"Well, Ms Pride. . ."

Just before taking a bite, Mary rose her hand in protest. "Call me Mary."

He smiled and said, "Mary it is. We might end up working together some on tightening security on hiring. . . Mr Simpson said that he might have to go back to current employees and do tougher background checks."

Mary had no time to respond before a sweet and quavering voice sounded: "Mr Comstock?" She looked up to see Hazel Montrose at the doorway to the lunch-room. Hazel was the person who got things done, all sorts of things, on the floor where the big-wigs were housed; it was unusual see her off that seventeenth floor during working hours. "I went to Mr Simpson's office and his secretary told me you'd been seen coming up with Mary, so I came looking for you. Mr Robinson and Mr Preskile would like you to come up immediately. I left word with Mr Simpson that you were called up to Mr Robinson's office."

"I'm also supposed to meet with Mr Osborne."

"He's aware you'll be with Mr Robinson. It might be a short meeting but there's been a shift in priorities." She looked over at Mary and smiled. "Hello, Mary. I'm sorry to be so impolite but you know how those men are when something important is going on."

Mary just smiled, though she was suddenly suspicious that large-scale lay-offs were being planned for Baxton. Ziggy and Jake were needing to meet with Al Comstock? What they needed to discuss was more important than Sven Osborne's concerns with security after the events of September

11? There were a lot of possibilities in a large complex operation like CMBG, but one of those possibilities was the need to move security people into Baxton to guard computer systems and other sensitive machinery and even paper files while a lot of people were being laid off and escorted out the door. Mary had never been involved in that sort of a mass lay-off, where sensitive corporate assets might be at risk, but she knew the drill and had heard personnel people from other companies describe those terrible sorts of events.

“Excuse me, Mary.” Mary smiled and nodded, and Al wrapped up the remaining half of his bagel and threw it away before returning to the table to pick up his coffee. Placing the top carefully on the cup, he turned to follow Hazel.

26 Defending Against Unwanted Solicitations

Jake first realized he and Ziggy looked beat-up and exhausted when Al Comstock did a double-take after looking at the two men. Jake passed his eyes over Ziggy's face and saw that the circles under the eyes were thickening and getting darker. He doubted if he looked too much better.

“So, Al, this is confidential, but of course nearly everything you deal with is highly confidential.” Al nodded and Ziggy nodded in return before going on: “We may be under attack by someone who wants to acquire us. I was suspicious about various things for...” Ziggy stopped to think but looked a bit uncertain when he continued, “I'm not quite sure when I really became worried though my diary records that it was nearly three weeks ago that I first noted some small-scale movements of our stock that I didn't entirely like. Anonymous sales and purchases that didn't strike me as being the usual crap of brokers covering their asses after they'd sold something they didn't own or bought something for someone else when that something wasn't really available.”

Al had been nodding and staring intently at Ziggy as the financial wizard was speaking and Jake had been paying intense attention as well—the younger man was hearing for the first time that Ziggy had some suspicions weeks ago.

The door to Ziggy's office opened and Ev Thornsby walked in, smiling in a formal manner. The elegantly dressed executive moved towards the table with the grace of a student of Fred Astaire, if not quite the grace of the master himself. Jake had heard, in fact, that Mr and Mrs Thornsby were ballroom dancing enthusiasts.

“This looks as cheerful as the wake I attended a couple of nights ago.”

Ziggy laughed and Al smiled before rising to shake Mr Thornsby's hand.

“So, Ziggy has dragged you into this as well, Al?”

“I don’t know. He’s just started to give me the background, but I don’t know much about this corporate take-over business.”

“Well,” said Ziggy in the slow manner of John Wayne preparing his troops for battle, “what I want to know is this. We own a lot of aerospace companies. Small operations for the most part, though they add up to a lot in total. Some do some military work or work for civilian agencies of the government, but they do the overwhelming percentage of their business for manufacturers of commercial airliners or freight-liners. Also, we do some maintenance as well as support of maintenance operations at airline companies or airports.”

“I imagine you want to ask me if the government would protect you from a take-over if the attacking company is. . .” Al shrugged his shoulders and lifted his hands in the manner of a man trying to catch hold of a thought. After a second or two, he suggested, “A foreign company? Or perhaps one with men who have some sort of suspicious background?”

“Something like that,” confirmed Ziggy. And then he went on to clarify the situation: “We don’t really expect you to discuss this matter with anyone yet, nor do we expect you to give us firm advice on hypothetical situations. We just wanted you to be aware of the situation in case we call you in the middle of the night to start using your contacts. In this country. Or Europe. Or Japan or even Singapore.”

“Gotcha, though my contacts are pretty weak outside of North America and Japan. And I’m certainly not an expert in that side of security, the national policy stuff. I’m a nuts-and-bolts, check-the-wiring and ‘look the suspect in the eye’ kind of guy.”

“Of course,” agreed Mr Thornsby in a soothing voice. “But you’ve also developed a lot of contacts in the FBI bureaucracy and you probably know a lot of people who have transferred over to the Homeland Security operations.” Al nodded and Mr Thornsby concluded, “We have a lot of contacts with various government officials, elected and appointed alike and we have some of the best legal minds available in our company and in our outside law firms. But we’re not leaving any bases untouched.”

Al nodded. Ziggy nodded. Jake wondered what Ziggy Robinson and Ev Thornsby were thinking. Did they have some reason to believe there might be some legitimate national security issues in this raid upon CMBG? Were they going to cry wolf to get the government to attack a stray dog? Were they merely covering all bases as they said? Or thrashing about? He

considered the possibility that Ziggy's judgment was a little off because of exhaustion and then maybe Mr Thornsby had simply jumped in to help cover for a subordinate, but...

As sharp as these men were, Jake was beginning to fear he'd cast his lot with creatures who had feet of clay, but that didn't bother him. He now knew he was at least a match for any of the CMBG executives, at least in technical areas of finance.

* * * * *

On Tuesday afternoon, when Jake and Mr Thornsby had returned from New Hampshire, they had been met outside the security check-post at a LaGuardia terminal by Phil Cooley, a man who'd been driving and carrying sensitive messages for GRF and its predecessor organization for nearly twenty years, and that was after retiring from the Newark police force. He was tall but stooped, vigorous of eye but having a slight palsy about his lips. Jake had heard that Phil was close to a second and final retirement and figured the top executives would miss him. Once Jake had tried to get a driver for a quick trip to the airport and was told he had to catch a taxi or outside limo though Phil had been sitting in the dispatcher's office reading a magazine. The dispatcher whispered to Jake that Sven Osborne, the Chief Executive Officer of GRF had told him to keep Phil around to fetch some people for a secret meeting.

As the limo was pulling out of the airport parking lot, Jake saw Phil was looking into the mirror to catch Mr Thornsby's eyes for the nod that indicated he could speak. From lips so trustworthy, though they shook a bit nowadays, had come the news: "Word is flying through the company, Mr Thornsby, that someone is going to buy us up. I tried to tell some people there aren't many as are big enough to buy up a giant like GRF, but everybody's convinced it's going on. The fellows up in taxes are having trouble getting anyone interested in the football pool right now. A lot of the boxes for this weekend are unsold."

"If the football fans are more interested in rumors of corporate mergers than this weekend's games, I would guess that it must be a serious rumor."

Jake, for his part, had remained silent, though he had been able to tell that Phil now knew the rumors had some substance to them. That had mattered little, still mattered little; Phil was absolutely trustworthy. And he passed on only rumors that were of legitimate interest and, so far as

Jake knew, Phil passed on rumors only to the executives. Certainly, Mr Thornsby would find it useful to know that the word was out that GRF was a possible target for a raider. Or maybe a possible partner in a friendly bid by another large corporation. Even friendly deals sometimes started with secret stock purchases, though Jake had his doubts about this one being a friendly deal. There were some strong personalities in CMBG and a merger might have to start with the purging of some like Ziggy. And Jake might go with him.

In fact, Jake had been meeting privately with Mr Thornsby up in Nashua that morning when Ziggy had called to let them know that Calvin Fowler had traded heavily in GRF stock and options for two days, and maybe he'd been trading at a lower level for weeks before that; Fowler was now holding pat so far as Ziggy and his informers could determine. That raider, not a man of good reputation for the most part, had played an instrumental role, as an outsider, in forcing at least two mergers and three hostile acquisitions. But Ziggy wasn't much worried about Fowler, thinking he was following, not leading, in this little skirmish. Or full-fledged war if it turned to that. Someone else, perhaps someone far more powerful and with far deeper pockets than Calvin Fowler, was behind most of the movement of stock. Or so said Ziggy, whose instincts for this sort of thing were said to be highly tuned.

For all of the possible problems, the possible disruptions to his life and career, Jake was enjoying himself. He was looking forward to the battle. This was what he had been training for since his first day at business school, and he had been dreaming of that sort of action for a couple of years before that.

* * * * *

Jake awoke immediately as soon as the hand touched gently upon his shoulder. The ensuing shake was as unnecessary as it was gentle. Even before raising his head, Jake mumbled out, "Hello, Ziggy. Anything happening yet?"

"Not yet, kid, not yet. I'm still not even sure what's going on out there in the murky waters. There are some sharks swimming around us, and they are nipping but they can't do us any harm. We can crush them, if they are the entire attack, merely by using our corporate stock and the stocks for which we hold proxy voting rights. We can make them bleed. Buying on

options like they did, they're paying effective interest rates of 25% or better on the full value of the stock. They'll make out like bandits if they force us to buy them out, or if some big shark comes along, one that can actually swallow GRF. If they fail, or even if it takes too long to win, they could lose tens of millions in a few short weeks. That's a cost of doing business, but it's a pretty hefty cost for them. These guys are definitely middle-feeders. They'll leave off the attack if we show we can fight them off."

"Well, Ziggy, just between us, and a lot of other people, we are undervalued—assuming we can pull all our recent acquisitions together into an efficiently operating group of companies. It won't be hard for Fowler to make a case to someone with bigger resources than him."

"Yeah," sighed out Ziggy. "Someone spotted our little secret before we could realize those hidden values. That's always a risk when you engage in some sort of long-term corporate strategy. You might end up losing control of your company before you can reap the benefits of your work."

"But at least the stockholders will benefit, either way. And you guys hold a lot of stock. I even have a little bit of GRF stock."

"It's nice that the union pension funds and the retired couple in Des Moines will do well, but we were looking to help them do well while we did very, very well. Remember, Jake, it would be awfully hard to get people to work as hard as we've worked over the past couple of years if they aren't going to benefit from it." Ziggy's freckled face broke out into an open grin. "But, lots of people have learned the hard way that the marketplace can be a harsh mistress."

"But you love her."

With a grin, Ziggy corrected Jake: "I love dealing with the bitch. It's hard to say I can love a mistress who might come out in a soft-pink negligee one night and come out in leather and studs and carrying whips and chains the next night."

And the two men laughed. Jake shook his head to clear it of the sleepiness and he rose to follow Ziggy out into the main room of his office suite. That main room was large, a good twenty by forty feet, containing a corner office unit where Ziggy worked when by himself or sometimes when he was with one or two other trusted workers. Otherwise, most times the action was taking place at a fifteen foot conference table, one end of which was set up as a desk for Ziggy.

Ziggy went right to that spot on the conference table where he picked up a pile of messages and documents, one in an express mail envelope, that

had arrived in just the five minutes he'd taken to rouse Jake from his sleep. Jake watched as Ziggy methodically and gently threw down one message or piece of mail upon the last, and then he came to a phone message. . .

"You were asking me last night about Kirsten Kirby?"

"Is she involved in the attack on us?"

Ziggy laughed but didn't raise his eyes from the short message. "You sound as if you wouldn't be surprised if the young she-wolf is involved."

"Is she?"

"Don't know, but Kevin Kirby, her uncle, called our chief counsel a few minutes ago. Bob talked to him quickly and then bailed out, saying he would call back in. . ." After looking at his watch, Ziggy said, "Another ten minutes or so. Bob's on his way here. He called Sven and we're the ones that Sven is sending out to ride on the back of the tiger. At least until we identify the tiger. By a convenient coincidence, Sven and Ev have a golf date with. . ." Ziggy thought for a few seconds before absentmindedly concluding: "Pete Kowalski. Know him? He's about your age."

"Went to MIT with him. He was a room-mate in our freshman year with one of my good friends. I've also met him in social settings since then. He came to that barbecue at Mr Osborne's house."

"So you know he's the manager of a fund that's our largest stock-holder. At least until our secret admirer shows himself."

"Actually, it's news to me that he's the manager of the fund. He was only a portfolio manager the last I heard, though the portfolio might have included GRF stock. His boss leave?"

"Kicked upstairs to an administrative post. Pete is a much better stock-picker."

"Did he set the golf date or Mr Osborne?"

"Pete called yesterday and set the date. He'd originally wanted me there as well, but he gracefully backed off when I challenged him to a game of tennis instead. I happened to be with Sven when Pete called."

"Is it a coincidence that he called while we're under attack?"

"Don't know, Jake. Maybe. Maybe not." He looked up and smiled and Jake looked up to see the door open. Mrs Redfield, Ziggy's administrative assistant stepped partway into the office and then stood aside as Bob Emerson walked through. He was a portly fellow, though a wonderful dancer according to the wives of the other executives—Bob was famous for wearing out two or three dancing partners per event. Jake made a mental note to check into ballroom dancing lessons sometime soon; he wasn't

attending many formal events yet, but the higher reaches of the corporate ladder involved receptions for politicians and other important people, dances at golf and tennis clubs where gathered the movers and shakers of American society.

After greetings were exchanged, a little gossip about the marriage of Bob's daughter exchanged, a little talk about the fate of the Nittany Lions indulged, Ziggy motioned for everyone to take a seat. "Any seat you wish," he said magnanimously but with a wink as only the seats at the conference table would put everyone in easy reach of the speaker-phone.

"It's good you have Jake here, Ziggy. He would have been involved in this even if you didn't already drag him in. The name of Baxton has come forth from Kevin Kirby's lips." After a pause when Ziggy waved Bob on to talk directly to Jake, the corporate counsel said, "Kevin Kirby was dancing around the real issues, and he made it clear he came in on this project, whatever it really is, as the lawyer for Karen Baxton Livingston but now he's working primarily for some ally who has joined her in this attempt to buy us out—if that's what they're attempting. He started out working for her, but she agreed to slip into the background and let her interests be taken care of by... Someone else, and Kevin wouldn't even give a hint who that is. We may find out soon. He made it clear we can rely on his word that this is a friendly approach. And he told me to have the two of you clear your decks. He specifically mentioned Ziggy Robinson and Jake Preskile. So far as the numbers go... Karen Baxton Livingston has accumulated a pile of GRF stock, more than \$300 million worth so far as I can figure. So she's serious, even though that's nothing to worry us. Her ally holds something on the order of a billion and a half in stock. Far from a majority of our stock but..."

"But enough to gain a seat on the board. And not much more, if we play our cards right. Unless, of course, the deal is one to the benefit of GRF stockholders." Ziggy passed a wink in Jake's direction. "It sounds as if Kevin's clients were not quite ready to approach us." He scratched the whiskers on his chin. "I wonder if they somehow heard we're aware something is going on. He's pouring water on the fires. Which is not always a safe thing to do."

"He said the word in the financial community is that Ziggy Robinson has gone to the mattresses. People are starting to talk, and he said his client is coming forth at this time to prevent hard feelings or any sort of drastic defense actions on our part. He kept emphasizing that we have nothing

to worry about. Not GRF as a corporation nor most of the executives as individuals.”

“Damn it, my disappearance from the talk-shows and dance clubs was noticed.”

“Well, actually, he mentioned you canceling your daily tennis game and also canceling a talk you were supposed to give at a church last night. Another of your attempts to moderate the anti-corporatist feeling in this country, I would imagine.”

Ziggy seemed to be chewing on his own insides. Jake decided to point out, “Perhaps Karen Livingston is just trying to force a good deal for the Baxton buy-out.”

“No. Maybe to start with,” said Ziggy as if enlightened about the fate of the Universe. Then he seemed to drift off for just a second or two of deep thought before smiling and saying, “She’s an obstetrician. I’ve never trusted doctors since the day I was tested for a hernia in first grade. And I’ve learned since then that anyone who’s trained to deliver babies feels she understands finance better than a hot-shot with degrees from MIT and Stanford.” He winked at Jake.

“I wouldn’t like this,” said Bob though no worry showed in his voice, “if not for Kevin Kirby giving his word it’s not a hostile attempt, but then the question arises: Why didn’t they contact you or Ev or Sven?”

“It might be friendly but they might have figured we wouldn’t listen to their offer of friendship unless they had already had accumulated a lot of stock.” Ziggy rolled his eyes and turned to his intercom, looking back with his eyes only, as he asked, “Anyone for coffee? Sodas or tea or water or juice are also possible though they cost extra.”

“You charge for refreshments in your office?”

“It’s this need to be more efficient and to eliminate excessive benefits to corporate executives. Otherwise the sharks will swarm. So, I’m figuring we make people pay a buck for each cup of coffee and we make it up to the people by starting to pay overtime to everyone, and the hourly rate for someone earning \$100,000 a year, at double-time. . .”

“Could buy an awful lot of coffee,” suggested Bob, “for someone putting in as many hours as Jake.”

Too tired to more than smile, Jake said, “Make mine black,” and then he rose to stretch his legs by walking around the table.

Bob looked over at Ziggy and said, “You been working our young financial genius too hard?”

With a shake of his head, Ziggy said, “No, he came in already tired when this began. Apparently, he’s let himself get something of a personal life. It happens too often with these single folk.” With a wink directed at Jake who’d turned the bend and was coming up the other side of the table, he added, “We’ll get him married off soon. That’ll force him to keep regular hours. And lots of them after the babies start arriving.”

Part V

Resistance and Submission

27 The Suitor Shows His and Wants Her to Show Hers

Flat were Jake's emotions when he found himself in a chair against the wall watching as Ev Thornsby and Ziggy Robinson and Sven Osborne leaned forward, head-to-head-to-head. Mr Osborne, the CEO and Chairman of the Board of GRF, was in the Burgundy leather recliner he kept in his office, the other two had pulled straight-backed chairs up to his left and to his right. Jake wasn't sure what they could be talking about. He and Ziggy had developed several scenarios, along with possible responses by CMBG. Most of their work had seemed to Jake to be meaningless exercises since Bob Emerson and Ziggy were both sure that Kevin Kirby was absolutely trustworthy, so long as he had given his word in very explicit terms that it would be a peaceful merger offer, though it had seemed likely to Jake that the suitor would be the dominant partner in any new company. But the identity of that suitor remained unknown, even with Ziggy using every contact he had, every trick he knew, to find out something. All he had found out was what they'd already known: Karen Baxton Livingston had been making regular purchases of stock for nearly five months, starting a short while *before* the Baxton family members in general had even been approached by Ev Thornsby. Preliminary discussions with Baxton management, including a few key members of the Baxton family, had begun earlier than that, so there was a possibility she had been told something by one of her relatives, but Ziggy said that was unlikely since she was on bad terms with all of her cousins who were active in the family business.

Ziggy sat back and spoke loudly enough to be heard by Jake halfway across the large room. "From the beginning, I had the feeling that the waters were being stirred by someone who doesn't have the financial muscle to complete an acquisition of GRF, someone who also doesn't have the

presence in the financial community to generate interest just by looking at us. The more I think about that, the more certain I am that Karen Livingston is filling that role, and that she is the one who deliberately went looking for a suitor for us. She's a matchmaker, a dangerous one, but only a matchmaker. She's always thought she was a financial genius as well as a good obstetrician and this is her way of proving it."

Jake remained quiet and motionless in the upholstered chair separated by nearly twenty feet from his three superiors; he observed the three men. Mr Osborne and Mr Thornsby, though quite competent in managing an ongoing operation, did not have that warrior mentality so deeply embedded in Ziggy and in most other investment banker types that Jake had ever met. And Jake wondered if he...

The thought had not completed itself before he looked back at the three men in conference and began to see Ziggy as the wise seneschal, serving his feudal master by counseling peace when possible but war when he deemed it necessary. Were not seneschals typically drawn from the ranks of warriors? And Jake thought of himself as...

A young warrior of corporate capitalism?

Personal inclinations, as well as ambitions, tied him more strongly to Ziggy than to Mr Thornsby, though Ziggy was not directly in his line of report. And Jake was glad as he watched and didn't hear a word, for he knew in his heart of hearts that Ziggy was working to strengthen the resolve of Mr Osborne and Mr Thornsby. Competent those men were in their areas of sales and corporate politics and even in developing corporate strategies. They were now butting up against their limitations: neither of the two had the imagination or the spirit necessary for this sort of fight—if it proved to be a fight.

A knock on the door drew Jake out of his meditations. Without a word being spoken, the door opened and one of the younger secretaries came in, only a step or so. "Mr Kirby is on the phone, Mr Osborne. He was calling Mr Robinson and the call was transferred over to your office."

Ziggy smiled and rose. He walked over to the phone and was soon greeting the "crazy Irishman" and asking him about the collapse of Notre Dame's football team. Jake remained sitting and remained quiet, letting himself return to his refashioning of reality as more chit-chat was batted back and forth for a short while, but his acts of re-imagining the world were interrupted when he heard the name 'Kirsten'. So, she was involved in all of this! Jake wondered if he had been used, but then he realized she couldn't

have been using him, at least not to gather information. She had probably known a lot more than he had at the time he'd met her.

Probably...

Maybe...

Likely...

Jake suppressed all of his uncertain lines of thought and returned his attention to Ziggy's end of his conversation. The experienced warrior greeted Bob Emerson, CMBG's corporate counsel who had just come on the line. There was more chit-chat, but it provided background to Jake who gathered that Bob and Kevin had been members of the same dining club at Princeton. Jake wondered why Kevin Kirby had gone to Princeton and then to Notre Dame for his law degree. It seemed that a lawyer headed for the investment banking industry would have done better by going to Harvard or Yale for a law degree, but Jake suppressed that line of thought as well, returning his concentration to Ziggy's words, and he heard arrangements being made for a meeting between the lawyers in Bob's office; Kirsten would be coming over with her uncle, so she was involved in this buyout attempt. And the young man knew with greater certainty that both he and his company had become opportunities for others. He wasn't sure how he felt about the situations, but he felt his lips curl up into a large smile as he realized that he lived in a wonderful world in which he was quite likely to be prosperous and successful.

Ziggy had returned to his seat at the left-hand of Mr Osborne. "He's only coming by to talk to Bob. He didn't even quite say he's come to talk about the matter of who will control CMBG in another few weeks. As you may have noticed, I begged off being there, since it doesn't concern anything of importance to me. Kevin hesitated as if about to confess something but then he said it would be fine, for now, if he met only with Bob."

From a distance, Jake studied the three men who were his superiors, so far as reporting relationships were concerned. Ziggy was as much a warrior as Jake felt himself to be, and Jake felt he would learn much from that ex-Marine. Sven Osborne was an operations man, a brilliant salesman who had worked his way up from selling commodity grade circuit boards to selling complex, turn-key operations: factory-installed factories. Mr Osborne was a good man to run the manor during times of peace and stable growth, but he had not the warrior spirit. Ev Thornsby was a financial operations specialist and did not have much of a background in investment banking; he also had not the presence nor the intestinal fortitude to lead a battle to

keep control of CMBG if that were to be necessary.

“And so, we continue to sit?” asked Mr Osborne, fidgeting a bit in his recliner, despite his dominant social characteristic of imperturbable geniality.

Ziggy nodded, a faint ghost of a grin passing over his lips. And talk turned to the efforts of the Knicks to rebuild to a powerhouse team. Jake made a few comments, from the viewpoint of a Celtics fan, but remained largely at the edge of the conversation and was glad when Ziggy said, “Jake and I will head down to my office and I’ll have something brought in for us while we wait for the call. We’ve both been beating our heads against a brick wall for most of the night and we’ll need to freshen up if we’re to be sent as the lovely, and powerless, messengers.”

A few minutes later, the two men were walking into Ziggy’s office suite when the older executive turned to Jake and laughed. “Kid, you’re just as intense as a good athlete preparing for a real big game. That’s good, but you’ve got to learn to loosen up on the outside. It keeps you more relaxed and ready for action and also lets you probe the thoughts and feelings of allies and enemies.”

Jake reddened only slightly, and Ziggy walked past him to his desk where he picked up the phone and said, “I’ll give a call to Carston Blake, who’s working with Bob on this one. Know him?”

Jake nodded. He’d met Carston a few times; they’d sat together once in the corporate box at a Rangers game. They’d talked a lot that night, and Jake had found that Carston was also the first one in his family to have a chance at a high level of success; by traditions established since the Emancipation, the men in the Blake family had been preachers of moderate ambition just as the men in Jake’s family had been skilled workers of moderate ambition. Ziggy was on the phone for just a few seconds when he hung up and said, “Carston is coming up to talk to us in person. He said he’s getting antsy and needs to get away from the conference room where he’s been holed up. He’d been waiting for word from Bob and our good barrister friend did emerge briefly from his meeting with the Kirbys to give Carston a message for us.”

A few minutes later, Carston Blake walked into Ziggy’s office, an air of excitement hanging about him. With his face ready to break into a grin again as signs of war were showing, Ziggy asked, “Do we know something, Carston?”

The young attorney nodded his head. “Bob’s back in conference with

the Kirbys, but he wanted me to talk to you and let you give Mr Osborne the news. . . .”

“Do you know who ‘they’ is?”

“FVTR.”

Ziggy looked ready to laugh as he leaned back. “Sven’s old company.” Jake remembered that Sven Osborne had been the executive vice-president in charge of sales and marketing at FVTR before he was brought in to revive CMBG—only five years ago a rather moribund manufacturer of commodity parts for the aerospace industry. After a short pause during which Ziggy was thinking hard, he spoke almost to himself, “Yeah, they must be short on cash with all the modernization they’d been doing. Practically rebuilt all their processing and assembly and transportation facilities. . . .” And then another pause before he thought out loud again: “But they have the reputation to pull this off if they’re able to convince some influential players in the investment banking community. Or maybe some big-time investors. And our collection of companies might complete the puzzle they’re working on, and they could use our unrealized values to buy us before we can start turning them into values recognized in our stock prices.” Ziggy laughed and then asked, Carston, “Did Bob have anything else to say?”

Carston shook his head. “He’s too busy trying to give no information to the Kirbys, each of whom apparently trained as an interrogator with the FBI.”

After a few moments of silence, the veteran of engagements both financial and military proposed, “I think the best strategy is for Bob and me to go to their place, with virtually no authority to commit GRF to anything.” After a short pause, he added, “I’ll take Jake and you can encourage Bob to take you if you wish.” After seeing Carston smile and nod, Ziggy rose as if the matter was settled even before he talked to Mr Osborne and Mr Thornsby.

Jake kept his silence though he disagreed with the more experienced warrior. Ziggy’s idea struck him as excessively defensive, most especially for a fellow with such a reputation for aggressiveness. He was sure that Ziggy should go to the meeting with the authority to at least guarantee a presentation to GRF’s Board of a decent offer.

“Well, young feller,” spoke Ziggy in the voice of a sidekick from a grade-B Western, “we’ve been summoned to be courted. Or to be enslaved. Let’s go and prepare ourselves so we look our best. Caleb Snowden won’t be all that concerned that we look pretty but it’ll make us feel better and more

confident. A warrior always tries to look his best when he goes into battle, even when best means a Ranger making himself up real pretty with grease-paint before he enters the jungle.” He grinned at Jake and commanded, “Why don’t you go first. I’ve still got a phone-call or two to make to see if my intelligence agents have come up with anything.”

Feeling himself to be less a warrior and more a sheep cleaning itself and preening itself for its own slaughter, Jake entered the inner room of Ziggy’s office suite. He fetched his suit from the closet and laid it out on the bed before undressing. On his way to the shower, he passed a full-length mirror in the bathroom and stopped to look at his generally trim self in the mirror over the dresser, examining the shoulders and arms which were well-formed though not excessively bulky. The chest was nearly hairless though broad and firm. Pects and biceps and abs and all the other muscles which he didn’t really know too well by name, were those of a man prepared for movement as well as close-contact fighting.

He paused as his hands were running down the sides of his chest and abdomen. Once again, his view of the world was altering, becoming almost magical, as he prepared for . . .

He didn’t really know what he was preparing for, but he needed to regain his focus without any silly thoughts which literalized his insight that he was a warrior of corporate capitalism. He retreated to the side of the bed and then sat down for a few seconds and did his best to get his insides under complete control, thinking first of a quiet walk on the sands of Cape Cod. From there he moved on to a vision of CMBG’s operational divisions. Where were the hidden values? Where was there fat? Where were there managers who seemed to perform well enough, under conditions fair or adverse, that they could be developed and brought up the corporate ladder? Where the valuable real estate and where the machinery needing replaced? He smiled at the thought that no one, not even Ziggy and certainly not Mr Osborne or Mr Thornsby, knew so much about the details of CMBG’s properties and operations as he did. Jake knew he was in a truly good position, and the future loomed ahead with more rewards, more prestige, and more power than he’d been dreaming of even a short while before.

He wondered if there was a chance he’d be offered a good opportunity after a hostile take-over? He felt it was all but certain. If FVTR wanted to realize those hidden values, it would be Jake who could best tell them where they were. He had certainly heard of Caleb Snowden, the highly-regarded CEO of FVTR, and knew the white-haired fellow to be as genial as Sven

Osborne and as sharp as Ziggy Robinson. Mr Snowden would know how to reward a young man who possessed not only a great deal of valuable information but also the mind which had known how to find the underlying data and to extract the information. And, perhaps most importantly, Jake had the warrior's spirit, the drive that had pushed him along to carry out those analyses in a manner that he knew, without excessive pride, to have been brilliant. As an undergraduate and a business-school student, he had performed at the level demanded by his professors and he had continued to perform at such a high level after entering the corporate world.

Jake stepped into the shower, a bar of fragrant soap in hand. It seemed only seconds later that he found himself staring at his own lathered face in the mirror. Slowly, methodically, he worked the razor over his face, wishing that Ziggy had called in a barber so they could both have faces as smooth as...

Rather than a sheep preparing itself for the slaughter, Jake was starting to feel the part of a maiden being taken to see if she met with the approval of a prospective bride-groom, or maybe the bride-groom's parents. He felt himself flushing again and suppressed a swear.

He felt his face making sure there wasn't so much as the hint of stubble. And then he heard a knock on the door. "You preparing yourself for your first prom, Jake?"

"I'm just making them wait."

Ziggy laughed and said, "Well, we need to be going in a half-hour or so. There is a standard for how long you can make people wait in these situations. After all, we don't want to give them the impression we're afraid of them or playing up to them, but we have to realize they might be our bosses in a few weeks."

Laughing out loud, Jake told himself the situation was truly getting serious. That was the first time he'd heard Ziggy hint they might be taken over, whatever their own desires or interests might dictate. Looking about, Jake saw the small suitcase containing his fresh underwear and socks, a well-shined pair of shoes and accessories matched to the charcoal-gray suit. It was resting on a luggage stand, prepared to be opened. No details had been missed by the people taking care of Mr Robinson and his office suite. And Jake was part of that suite for now.

A few minutes later, Jake had slapped some cologne on his throat and cheeks. He took one more look at the bottle before setting it back into its place—a designer brand of a mild-smelling musk. He stepped back, took

one more look at the surroundings. Everything, from colognes to toilet fixtures, was of the highest quality. He smiled and told himself that he might well have facilities like this in his office. He'd been planning on rising to the Senior VP level, or better, in five to ten years, but he might make it sooner than that if things worked out well. . .

If he showed both technical skills—which he knew he possessed, and also the right sort of warrior spirit—which he was starting to exhibit but had to show to Ziggy and to Sven Osborne. Maybe it was even more important that he impress Caleb Snowden. And Kevin Kirby. And he wondered if he should worry about impressing Kirsten. She was seeming to him to be nearly as dangerous as she was fascinating.

And he emerged, to the whistles and cat-calls of Ziggy and Phil Cooley, the company's most trusted limo driver. Ziggy shot up and walked into the bathroom, muttering as he passed Jake, "Don't know if I can get myself as pretty as that boy, don't know at all."

Phil laughed and lifted a mug from the tray brought from the executive dining-room while Jake had been preparing himself. "Some fresh coffee?"

"Any juice on the tray?"

"Orange or pineapple or tomato?"

"How about half orange and half pineapple."

Phil laughed again. "You're going to trust a retired New York City cop to mix a drink for you? I don't know how to mix anything unless it has a double-shot of gin in it." A few seconds later, he handed Jake the drink and said, "You guys follow the Auerbach philosophy."

"What do you mean, Phil?" asked Jake as he chose a corn muffin from the tray and buttered it up.

"The Celtics coach. . ."

"I'm from Massachusetts. I know pretty well who Red Auerbach is."

"Well, I was a Knicks fan, but I remember somebody, maybe Bill Russell saying: 'Red always said you gotta look like a winner if you want to be a winner.' I thought it was pretty funny at the time because the Celtics always looked clean and neat but those baggy outfits they wore for years after everybody else had gone to sleeker uniforms. . ."

"And now everybody has returned to oversized shorts again."

"I'll bet Ziggy was pretty spiffy most of the time back when he was a pilot in the Marines. Those guys have the same attitude as Auerbach. If you look sloppy, that's how you'll perform."

"I guess you don't see sloppy pilots very often."

“I never saw one during my two tours of duty.”

Jake looked over at Phil, remembering he was approaching final retirement—the man was over 70 and CMBG drivers had to retire at 72, no matter their health or vision. “Korea?”

“Cold war. I was an infantryman in one of the tank units facing off the Red Army in 48 and 49. There was little actual shooting, except for the poor suckers who tried to escape East Germany and they were shot by the Reds with us helplessly watching. But it was tense anyway and it was made clear to us that foot soldiers in a tank outfit had the job of giving up their lives to protect the armored vehicles.” He laughed again. “As stupid as that might sound to a true civilian like me.”

* * * * *

“Hello, Jake.” High pitched but pleasant the voice and Jake turned around to see Kirsten Kirby who had walked in with the group of FVTR executives and their attorneys. It had been a casual entrance and the mood remained casual on the surface, as if there were no conflicts, not even a possible conflict, between these two groups, those entering and those standing around the room, at ease and giving no sense that they were in a difficult situation. And Jake thought that maybe this would remain a pleasant encounter, and perhaps a friendly merger, but he knew that only time would reveal the truth. And he also knew that time might well change the current truth into something far different, maybe better, maybe not.

Kirsten had walked over to stand near Jake and Carston at the coffee-table. A jovial man with a ruddy face walked over to greet Ziggy who gave out a hearty, “Kevin, it’s been a long time no see.”

Kevin Kirby laughed and said, “Probably a pleasantly long time.”

“That depends, me lad, that depends. But I’d always be willing to join you at MacSorley’s for a mug of pub brew that’s as good as mother ever made.”

Kevin winked for most of the room to see and said, “Does your mother know you tell stories about her and her bootlegging ways?”

“Know? Hell, she’s my main source. She’d rather have people talking about her than not talking about her, and you know what that sometimes involves.”

Jake was still looking at Kevin Kirby and Ziggy Robinson when Kirsten spoke quietly, “Well, Jake, were you and Ziggy living in a war-room these

past few days? I'm assuming Ziggy's famous instincts told him something was up." And then she stepped back and gave Jake the once-over. "But, you look awfully nice and awfully fresh. I guess you've been having a relaxing and fun time instead of struggling to find out what was behind mysterious stock purchases." She winked at him and then immediately looked back to see her uncle waving everyone to their seats at the table.

Carston Blake caught Jake's attention for a second, the young lawyer's face scrunched up into a question, but then he winked and turned to walk towards the table. Jake took one deep breath and then moved quickly to take the chair next to Ziggy who was at the left hand of the man sitting at the head of the table. That man, and Jake knew him to be Caleb Snowden, was nearly six feet and a portly 240 or so. Mr Snowden, was looking as congenial as a smooth-shaven, but still white-haired, Santa Claus. Jake had, in fact, heard only good things about this man, as a business executive and as a human being. And then he heard his name being mentioned to Mr Snowden. Jake smiled and stood to offer his hand which was received in a firm but quick shake.

There were two other people at the table that Jake didn't know: a man about 40 and a woman probably a little younger. Kevin Kirby introduced them as Bill Clemens, the Chief Operating Officer of FVTR and Tracy Rogers, the Chief Financial Officer. Jake looked around, without moving his head much, and saw there were two young men and a young woman who had quietly retreated to take seats against the wall even as the others were going through the introductions. The woman had a laptop open, the two men had notepads at hand.

Bob Emerson and Carston Blake were sitting across and just down from Ziggy and Jake. Kevin Kirby sat immediately to Caleb Snowden's right, Bill Clemens and Tracy Rogers took the next two seats. Jake found himself facing Bill Clemens, a man who looked to have dried up sometime before he entered kindergarten. Kirsten came over and sat down to Jake's left.

As Kirsten was still settling herself, Ziggy joked, "You guys got me and Jake surrounded good. Our remaining avenue of escape has been cut off by a Kirby."

Kevin smiled and, in a lighthearted tone, said, "As I said, Ziggy has informed me he has no power to make any commitments for GRF. So this is really just a shadow meeting of sorts, but, then again, GRF is little more than a shadow company, making life easier for some of the executives of CMBG, which is where the real action is."

Bill Clemens looked over, no sign of humor on his face, and his voice was dry as he said, "It must have taken an act of God to strip Mr Robinson of all his powers."

"I'm sure," said Kevin, "that Sven Osborne and Ev Thornsby will be relying heavily upon Ziggy's opinion." His manner was still lighthearted.

Jake was trying to figure out the personalities. He'd already noticed that, when Kevin had repeated Ziggy's claim to be powerless, Mr Snowden had repressed an urge to turn immediately towards his top two executives, and he had a feeling it was Tracy Rogers who was the close and trusted advisor to Mr Snowden. Clemens looked to be a PIA who considered himself a tough character.

"Mr Robinson," was the thrust from Bill Clemens in a tone nearly sarcastic and one which didn't seem to meet with the approval of Tracy Rogers, and then, a split-second later, it failed to meet the approval of Mr Snowden. But Jake had been mistaken in his understanding, or so he thought on another split-second's reflection: Mr Snowden had been watching Ziggy and hadn't been so concerned with Bill Clemens' words until the tone registered on him. Still was Jake sure that Tracy Rogers would be Ziggy's real competition for Caleb Snowden's position. Kevin Kirby merely looked uncomfortable but didn't make so much as a gesture to stop the flow of speech from Bill Clemens mouth: "we believe that GRF is worth a bit more than its current market value. There are many reasons for a situation such as that arising, but the major possibility is a failure on the part of current management to properly utilize the assets of the company and its subsidiaries." Tracy Rogers now looked to be resigned to a bad situation, but Ziggy was as calm as if he had heard words more friendly, or at least more polite, than those which had actually come from the lips of Bill Clemens.

"Phrased differently," interposed Kevin in his genial voice, "we think that a combination of FVTR and GRF would be worth more than the total of the individual corporations."

"As a side issue: what is the feeling on the combination of the managements of FVTR and GRF?"

"Is that of great importance?" asked Bill Clemens. "It's the stockholders' interests which are primary under the laws and customs of this country."

Ziggy just continued smiling and Jake realized he considered Bill Clemens to be no more than a temporary annoyance.

“We’re not here to discuss the philosophy of corporate stewardship.” The words had been calmly spoken by Bob Emerson. “What is the situation with your purchases of our stock? And what do you intend to do with the shares you have accumulated?”

“We have,” spoke Mr Snowden in a resonantly friendly voice, “about five percent of your stock. Karen Livingston and her husband’s family trust own another two percent.”

“They were the ones who suggested the acquisition?”

Mr Snowden looked over at Ziggy, seeming to be disturbed by the complacent tone of voice. “Is that a problem that should worry us? All of us in both companies who are interested in maximizing values for the stockholders?”

“It might be,” suggested Bob Emerson. “But let’s move on for right now. It might also be a problem at this point for us to say why Dr Livingston’s involvement might create legal difficulties for both us and you.”

“Seven percent interest in GRF will probably get you a seat on our board of directors,” claimed Ziggy in a friendly voice and with a smile still upon his face. “Maybe even a seat on the executive committee. But more than that?” Ziggy waved away the suggestion. “The owners of most of the remaining 93% trust the CMBG management and are fully aware of our plans for realizing a more complete value in those operations. And those owners include some powerful investors.”

Kevin Kirby smiled. “A seat on the board. Just what my clients feel is coming to them.” He was speaking in a jovial voice with a joking undertone to match that of Ziggy’s voice. “But, of course you have no power to offer us any such glorious prize.” And he winked at Ziggy.

“If not such a glorious prize, what do you want?”

It was Caleb Snowden who answered, “For now, we want little more than access to some information. And a meeting with people who have the power to make decisions.”

“That,” said Kevin, “would likely be Ziggy after another magical transformation.”

There were sounds of quiet laughter as well as smiles on the faces of the people sitting around the table. Everyone returned to stolid faces and silence after a few seconds and Ziggy spoke, “A lot of information can be obtained from the piles of paper we file with the SEC each quarter, from our tax filings, from the various information we distribute openly to stockbrokers and journalists.”

“We want to know,” said Mr Snowden slowly, pronouncing each syllable, “what you intend to do with all of the properties you have assembled. What sense does it make to keep a large real estate trust bundled up with aerospace manufacturers and service-providers? Why are you acquiring Baxton? Except for the JRLE real-estate trust. . .”

“JREI,” came the correction from Bill Clemens, which interruption seemed to break the flow of whatever pitch Caleb Snowden was about to make.

“Whatever. That makes little sense when set against your other holdings.”

Ziggy joked, “We could be talked into selling JREI if you can arrange a good enough price.” People smiled or laughed once again, but Jake noticed Bill Clemens did not look to be amused.

To Jake’s surprise, Mr Snowden looked directly at him before returning that calm gaze to Ziggy. “You’ve moved fast and and made some smart decisions in your corporate expansion. In a couple of cases, you’ve picked up nice companies we were just starting to examine. Then, Dr Livingston and her husband came to us about a possible buy-out of Baxton. Somewhat separated from her family, she didn’t realize her cousins were already in early discussions with Ev Thornsby. We were the ones to tell her that GRF might be buying out Baxton, a conjecture she was only able to confirm about four days ago.”

“I guess,” said Ziggy, “that we didn’t do a very good job of keeping a secret.”

“One of our regional sales-managers noticed Ev Thornsby in New Hampshire—twice in Nashua, and then saw him again in Keene in the company of Tom Baxton and the manager of Baxton’s warehouse operation in Keene. It didn’t take much brain-power to go from there, though we did run through the process of confirming that Ev was not a down-hill skier, nor did he own a vacation get-away in northern New England. We decided it was better to let GRF buy Baxton and then we could buy GRF. That was when Karen discovered that the manager of the Livingston family trust funds had started to buy GRF because he saw good value in your company. She took control, more or less, forcing that manager to buy still more, to the point where the Livingston family trust has about 40% of its holdings in GRF stock. \$300 million is a lot of money, even to the Livingstons.” Caleb Snowden, who was clearly not about to let anyone interrupt him, raised his hands and confessed, “I’m being perfectly honest in all of this because I’m

not interested in any gamesmanship. This is an honest offer to explore a friendly merger to the benefit of both CMBG and FVTR. I'm almost sorry I agreed to let my people start purchasing your stock before I approached you or Sven, but it may have been necessary. After all, we're only marginally bigger than you, and we needed to force the issue a little."

"I'm sure it was a business decision with no personal animosity intended. But," asked Ziggy, "let's just suppose the friendly offer isn't accepted? What then?"

Caleb Snowden just dropped his hands and turned to Kevin Kirby, who drawled out a, "Well," and then paused while he doodled a little on the pad in the leather portfolio which was open on the table in front of him. He continued to doodle for a few seconds and even after he spoke again: "I think we've accomplished our purpose of making initial contact. Ziggy is obviously going to avoid substantial discussions. Probably appropriate under the circumstances. He needs to talk with Sven Osborne and Ev Thornsby." Ziggy just smiled and generally did his best to look innocent of all charges. "This isn't a hostile situation. Mr Snowden specifically rejected all plans involving an alliance with a raider or even a more conventional investment bank. Investment bankers will, of course, be involved once we move towards a deal."

"If," interjected Ziggy.

"I think there's little doubt, Ziggy. Mr Snowden has been quite honest about his intention to merge the two companies. And that is what we really want from GRF management—the same sort of honesty. We need access to your thoughts. And the thoughts of Jake and the others in the company who are setting the strategies for melding together the somewhat incoherent mess of very attractive properties that GRF has acquired."

"You *do* seem to be fairly well acquainted with our organization charts and our internal delegation of responsibilities."

"Any headhunter or management consultant in the financial field could tell us, or anyone else, what you and Jake do and how important you are to CMBG." It was Tracy Rogers who had spoken and she immediately looked over to Mr Snowden. The two engaged in some sort of secret communication and then Caleb Snowden put his hands down on the table and pushed himself up. The meeting was over. Kevin Kirby rose and was just behind Ziggy in reaching Caleb Snowden. Tracy Rogers also joined the group while Bill Clemens went off to talk to the young woman and one of the young men who'd been observing the meeting from the seats against the wall.

Jake stayed apart, studying the people and their interactions. He noticed Bill Clemens leave. And he heard and saw as Ziggy told a joke about a man with a parrot on his shoulder. Caleb Snowden remained dominant though relatively quiet in Ziggy's presence. Tracy Rogers was reserved though not at all retiring—she held her place in the midst of the powerful men.

The young warrior of corporate capitalism suddenly realized he was tired and also bored with the image of himself as a warrior. He retreated to a small table which had been pushed against the wall. It held various snacks and drinks—fruits and muffins and croissants, orange juice and bottled water and coffee. Jake decided he'd had enough coffee over the past couple of days and was pouring himself a glass of water when he felt a hand touching the back of his shoulder. He turned to look into the smiling eyes of Kirsten. "Don't you think these sorts of affairs are quite romantic, Jake? All the flirting, all the proposing and negotiating about 'Your place or mine?'"

"Well, what *will* it be? Your place or mine?" And he winked.

She ignored the wink and told him, "I saw Sally Sunday night. She sent her greetings and said something about the three of us getting together some time."

Jake had no chance to respond before Kevin Kirby came up and offered his hand. His eyes were twinkling in the manner of a good-natured Irish politician. "Well, young man. One way or another, I'm sure we'll be doing some business in the future. You have a very good reputation already, and you'll do well whether this merger goes through or not."

"Let's just hope that we all agree upon the correct decision, whatever that proves to be."

The ruddy-faced lawyer, powerfully built though an inch or so shorter than Jake's five, ten, laughed. "Just what the business world needs. A diplomatic pessimist. Or maybe that should be: a pessimistic diplomat."

"I'm actually inclined to optimism, but I've been well-trained not to fall in love, or even like, with any deal. First you examine it in gory deal, analyze it as appropriate, and then you still don't fall in love with it, no matter how good it is. It avoids a lot of heartbreaks."

Ziggy walked up, a grin on his face, though Jake knew that meant little. Ziggy was the sort to grin. Back in his fly-boy days, he'd probably grinned while flying into the anti-aircraft barrages over Damascus.

Jake endured another ten minutes of banter and sports-talk before the four men from CMBG were walking out the door, Ziggy having promised to

set up a general meeting between the top executives of the two companies, as well as a private meeting between Caleb Snowden and Sven Osborne, two old friends who could speak openly, as Caleb had noted. For reasons Jake couldn't make explicit even to himself, he was thinking some sort of merger was a done-deal, but he was suspicious if only because it would seem that Mr Snowden should have privately contacted his old friend Mr Osborne. Then again, he was realizing there was something of a mismatch between Caleb Snowden and Sven Osborne, and maybe Mr Snowden had not wanted to risk Mr Osborne being threatened by a more domineering presence. Ev Thornsby, though a good corporate politician in a stable situation, was likely over his head. Jake was more certain than before. . .

As the four men were standing on the curb, waiting for Phil to maneuver the limo next to them, Bob Emerson turned to Jake and asked, "Well, young man what do you think now?"

With Ziggy looking at him intently, Jake said, "I think it's nearly a done deal and I confess to having fallen in love with it, even if I did preach against quick romances to Kevin Kirby just a few minutes ago. The merger would increase our chances of becoming the first corporation to successfully bundle up a number of machine-shop operations, and we've added a number of industrial supply operations as well."

As they rode back to the CMBG Tower, the four men mostly sank into their own thoughts. Jake found himself in a warm and comfortable place for he was realizing, more strongly than ever, that all his hard work, in college and in business school and over the first five years working in CMBG, was starting to really pay off. And he couldn't help remembering that Kevin Kirby, Caleb Snowden, and Kirsten Kirby had all been casting him proprietary looks of one sort or another at the end of the meeting.

Opportunities were abundant and life could be wonderful for those who had the courage and the skills to take advantage of those opportunities.

28 After the Encounter, the Blood Returns to the Brain

Jake went home to catch some shut-eye, but, though he was exhausted, he felt too agitated to sleep, and didn't even bother to lie down, choosing instead to put on his running clothes and head out into the cold October air. He was feeling better and was hitting his stride as he ran up a path towards the reservoir, remembering once again that depressing movie where Dustin Hoffman was running countless circles around this same body of water. That fellow played by Hoffman, as he remembered, had been a survivor but otherwise a loser. Jake saw confirmation coming, real soon, that he, Jake Preskile, was destined to be a real winner. A warrior of the corporate world, a man to be reckoned with.

All because he had been blessed with a good brain, a good upbringing, and a bit of personal gumption that had led to...

FOCUS
FOCUS
FOCUS

A warrior of the corporate world in the greatest country the world had ever known. Jake felt truly good, he felt truly good about himself.

29 Easing Into a Relationship

Mary answered, “Hello,” on the fourth ring, her voice hoarse with the sleepiness of a mouth-breather. Her nose was, in fact, a little stuffed. And someone else was snoring. She looked back into the room at Bayard’s prone figure, even as she heard Jake say, “Hello, Mary. I wanted to call and apologize. I think I walked by you the other day and only kind of grunted something. I was tired and thinking hard about something but there is no excuse. . . .”

While looking at Bayard, stretched out on the carpet with a copy of *The Wealth of Nations* rising and falling in rhythm to his diaphragm and lungs, she shushed Jake and told him, “Oh, I understand things like that. I tend to like intense people.” And then Mary steeled herself for a possible confrontation before saying, “But there is something that’s really been bothering me.”

“What’s that?”

“What’s going on with Baxton?”

“The sale is going through on pretty favorable terms to the current owners and the employees alike. Why? Are you having a problem getting information for your analyses?”

“No, I was getting suspicious about all the secrecy. To be honest, I was wondering if management has decided on large-scale lay-offs or downgrading of employees at Baxton and. . . .”

“I don’t know the final numbers off the top of my head, but there is going to be some down-sizing by way of attrition. Your estimates of retirements and ordinary turnover give us more than enough room to get the workforce down to the right size. Baxton might even be hiring pretty aggressively in six months or so if your estimates pan out.”

“Then why. . . .”

“I can’t tell you until it’s made public.”

“And when’s that? And *what’s* that? And who? and where? just to make the list complete.”

Jake laughed in a distracted manner, and his voice was flat as he answered, “I can’t tell you much at all because nothing’s set yet and. . . Well, I just can’t say much at all. What’s been distracting me is another deal that you don’t know about and you can’t know about it yet.”

“Need to know basis?”

“Something like that.”

“Fair enough.” Mary paused and then rushed the question, “So, it’s just another acquisition?”

Her little rhetorical strategy had no effect on Jake whose voice was still flat as he told her, “Sure, we can say that.”

His tone of voice made Mary laugh. Out of the corners of her eyes, she could see Bayard stirring. “We can say that, but it’s not really true?”

“We can say that, too. If you wish.”

“You’re awfully obliging.”

“Always willing and eager to serve a pretty lady.”

“And awfully chivalrous. Now I’m getting really suspicious.”

“Tell you what, Mary, why don’t we schedule a friendly get-together in a week or two, after this deal stabilizes into a mere crisis of paper-gathering. You can bring your boy-friend if you wish. Even those two Southern Belles if you wish. I might be bringing someone as well.”

“The little lady has returned to Alabama and her cousin to Tennessee.”

“That’s good. A fourteen year-old girl belongs with her parents.”

“But what makes you think,” and she locked Bayard’s eyes in a stare just as he was spinning around to face her, catching him in mid-stretch, “that Bayard is my boy-friend?”

“The same gut instinct that will make me a terror on Wall Street some day.”

Mary laughed before asking, “So you found someone for a possible merger?”

Jake laughed in return and said, “You know, Mary, we might be real good friends at that. I’ll try to stop by your desk for a quick coffee and chat sometime over the next couple of days.”

“Well, I wouldn’t wish to disturb the busy executive.”

“Joke all you want, but I’m going to be crushed by work over the next week or maybe even the next month. But I’m always ready to spare some time for a frustrating talk with you.”

Mary was still chuckling through her cold when she went over to sit on the floor next to Bayard. She leaned her head on his shoulder and he wrapped his arm about her. “Well, boyfriend, do you want to go out to dinner one of these days with a friend who’s a bit of a corporate shark?”

“I never called him a shark. He’s just so concentrated on issues of economic efficiency that he’s forgotten that economics is how you make your living after you’ve structured a moral society. At least it should be.”

30 Harmful Leaks

“A small container of cole slaw... That one.” And Mary pointed to the pan of slaw that was a bit spiced up with extra horse-radish and she knew not what else. “And some egg-and-potato salad, a turkey and swiss cheese on whole-wheat and some of that rare roast beef on a bulky roll.”

“What do ya’ want on those sandwiches, Miss?”

“Nothing. I’ve got stuff at home.”

“I can put mayonnaise or mustard or something else on the side for you.”

“That’s all right.”

Mary moved down the counter as she detected a new customer on her left, but she’d just taken a single sideways step when she felt a hand upon her arm. Looking back, she saw a woman she knew only slightly, having been marginally involved in hiring her. Mary remembered her first name only.

“Lorraine, how are you? Are things going well down in public relations?”

“Sure,” answered Lorraine as if uninterested in her own job. “With all the presentations the big-wigs do, I’m learning a lot of computer stuff.” The woman was pleasant looking and shapely though she dressed a bit fancy for the office and could—in Mary’s opinion—have benefited from a more moderate use of make-up. Lorraine looked about as if to check for spies in the deli; then she leaned over to Mary and whispered in a voice which was surely heard by at least two of the counter men and maybe the customer just entering from the street: “Somebody’s buying our whole company and they’re gonna move us to Kansas. Or Florida. Depends on the tax deal they can get.”

Now Mary understood the way people had been acting since about three or so. She’d been busy and had glided by everyone with a pleasant greeting. People had acted as if...

“That was it. They’d wanted a chance to tell the rumor to virgin ears.”

“Virgin whats?” Lorraine looked puzzled and the grayhaired man who’d stepped up to take her order looked merely amused.

“Ears. People had been acting like they wanted to tell me something the last hour or two of work and I was too busy to give them a chance. This must be the rumor they were trying to spread.”

“It’s more than a rumor, Sugar. It’s a done deal from what I heard. They’re gonna empty out all our retirement accounts and lay off a lot of people. And anybody who keeps his job is gonna have to move out to Tulsa or to Tampa.”

Mary thought to point out that Tulsa was in Oklahoma, not Kansas, but then...

For all she knew, there was also a small town in Kansas named ‘Tulsa’.

“I wouldn’t worry if I were you, Lorraine. I haven’t heard any rumors about a buy-out, and I usually hear such things pretty quickly. It might turn out to be true, but you might as well wait until you hear some facts. I’m sure management will want to tell us the truth as soon as the deal is settled. It does them no good to allow dangerous rumors to spread.”

Lorraine looked at her suspiciously, as if Mary were part of some management conspiracy to keep everyone in the dark until they could fire them with maximum effect. Mary just smiled at the woman and then handed some cash to the counterman who’d come over with a bag filled with the casual dinner she was bringing home for her and for Bayard—if he had yet gotten home from the public library. She remembered her warning to Bayard not to go chasing young women around the library this time, and the counterman sent her a playfully flirtatious wink. Realizing she must have smiled in a suggestive way when thinking about Bayard, she winked in response. It was a harmless game and the man behind the counter was a good-looking man in his early sixties or so; she was guessing he was a man who knew how to have a good time without damaging himself too badly. She wondered if Bayard liked to dance and realized once again that there was so much she wouldn’t know about him when they...

That is, if they...

Things were moving so fast and she was more pleased than frightened.

Soon she was on the crowded West Side train, smelly with too many bodies, however clean most of them were. Even the mixture of the various perfumes and colognes and soaps bothered Mary on some days recently—she was losing those barriers which made it possible to live in New York

City. Or any big city. And this day she seemed particularly sensitive to the signs of other human animals, though she tried to smile pleasantly at every person who was thrown against her by the movement of the train. The train screeched to a halt and seconds later she was realizing the urine and mold smells of the station bothered her still more than the people smells of the train and then. . .

She was breathing fresh air blowing in from the west. New Jersey air. Could it be called fresh, let alone clean?

And she set off, heading the short distance south to get to the street where lay her apartment which she no longer considered home, even in a temporary sense. It was more like a motel room that happened to have a scattering of her personal items on the shelves and in the cabinets. By the time she was walking up the stairs inside the building, she was hoping, against reason, that Bayard would be up there. He'd had a lot to do, searching through catalogs of graduate school programs as well as doing a search of private schools in Vermont and New Hampshire. Maine was still an outside possibility and they had even mentioned Canada in one of their discussions a day or two ago.

31 Corporate Consummation

Bayard was in the kitchen making hot fudge sundaes when Mary heard the the sound of the buzzer for the front door of the building. Wondering who would be coming by without calling, Mary went to the speaker and asked, “Yes? May I help you?”

“Mary, it’s Jake. The press releases just went out and. . . Well, I’ll explain my latest round of boorish behavior and give you some very important news if you let me in. It’ll take just a second.”

“You weren’t actually impolite yesterday. You just weren’t exactly. . . friendly. Anyway, you have to answer a question before I let you in.”

In a wary voice, Jake asked, “Yes?”

“Do you want a hot-fudge sundae?”

A burst of static nearly drowned out the laughter which came over the speaker and then Jake’s voice came more clearly, “That would be wonderful.”

A few minutes later, the three of them were sitting on the floor, Mary and Jake with their backs against the couch, Bayard still in his strange and quiet mood sat with his back against the wall at the far end of the room. Not that that was so very far in a Manhattan apartment—at least one affordable by a young woman in lower management.

“So, what’s the big news in the press releases, Jake? Does it concern CMBG being bought out, presumably by a very large corporation?”

He laughed and asked, “Are rumors already spreading?”

Mary shrugged and said, “I was told we’re being bought out by some sort of neo-Nazi organization that will fire most of us and torture the rest by moving them to Kansas.”

“Kansas?”

Mary shrugged again. “I know it doesn’t make a lot of sense but I don’t start these rumors, I just repeat them. I made a half-hearted attempt

to suppress this one, but only in the person of one rumor-monger. She thought I'd been signed up by the corporate conspirators who are going to be using the employees for genetic research. Or something like that." After slurping down a mouthful of mostly hot fudge and whipped cream, she added, "Actually, I've juiced up the fears a little in my retelling of the rumor, but I've got an idea it would be a good idea to let the employees know right away that..." She looked right at Jake before continuing, "*I hope* those employees are mostly safe."

"As far as I know. I'll be involved in the planning going forward, and I was at one of the crucial meetings, but I don't know much right now, except that it is a friendly merger. And the people in charge of FVTR are high-quality people of good moral integrity."

"They like you, don't they? Of course, that's understandable. I know someone who saw you going off with Ziggy to a meeting the other day and they said the two of you were all prettied up like you were going to a board meeting. Were you courting or being courted?" Mary looked goo-goo eyes at Jake for a few seconds before breaking up in laughter.

Bayard stood and walked over, putting out his hand to take first Mary's dish and then Jake's dish. A few seconds later, Mary and Jake were alone and she put her hand upon Jake's forearm. "Is something wrong?"

"No."

He spoke in a voice so flat as to push her away and Mary did as he seemed to want, first withdrawing her hand and then collapsing into silence. There was sound of washing in the kitchen and, otherwise, the apartment remained quiet for a minute before Bayard returned to stand and look down upon Mary and Jake. He seemed to be debating something inside of himself. And then his face tightened up and he asked, "Who is she, Jake? Did you just meet her?"

To Mary's surprise, Jake didn't get angry. And he even confessed, "It's two of them. I mean two entirely different sorts of women."

Mary had guessed something like that was up but had been reluctant to broach the subject with Jake because of their recent near-involvement. But it was she who asked, "Why don't you tell us about them? Maybe talking will help you through..."

"Through what?"

"Well, you seem to be a bit in turmoil. I know you must be all wound-up with the coming merger. I imagine you'll play a big role, especially if Ziggy Robinson has already taken you to an important meeting with our

new bosses. It was our new bosses you met, wasn't it?"

Jake's face reddened, and then he confessed, "One of the women was at the meeting. She's a lawyer with a Wall Street firm." He sighed and paused briefly before going on to say, "The other woman lives in the building next to mine. She's a commercial artist but really an old-fashioned woman in many ways. Not exactly a clone of my mother, but she and my mother could deal with each other and share a lot of activities. Kirsten..."

"Is Kirsten the lawyer or the artist?"

"Lawyer."

"And..."

"Charlotte."

"That's a pleasant old-fashioned name."

"She's very nice. And so's Kirsten, but she's a deep and turbulent pool, if you know what I mean. At least, I think she is. I've met women who've given false impressions of being dangerous or erratic... A dangerous game in my opinion, and one that makes them unattractive to men who... Well, to men they'd be safe with."

"I don't need a treatise on women who go for bad boys. I've known some of them." And then she wondered, silently, why Jake had raised the issue.

"I guess so, but I've been thinking lately about the dangers that can arise anytime you make yourself an attractive opportunity for someone else. It doesn't matter if you're a human person or a corporate person."

"You talk as if this fiction of 'corporate person' had some reality." Jake looked up at Bayard as if surprised he were still there, but then he laughed. Bayard looked ready to be insulted. Mary felt herself tensing up inside, but Jake waved his hand in what seemed to be a denial that he'd intended any insult. Mary felt herself relax even before Jake explained, "I've been under such tight control over the past few days, and it was hard in that meeting. Not only that woman, but also her uncle... And both were studying me... Maybe because of the deal being discussed, because the head of the other company was also studying me... But..." Jake laughed again. "And the word 'focus' came to me when I was looking at you, Bayard. The word ran through my head so many times as I was psyching myself up for a possible battle for control over CMBG. Just like a warrior does when he enters battle."

"Visualizing what might happen so you could react faster than if you had to think it through on the spot?"

Jake looked over at Bayard in surprise. “It’s mostly military people and athletes who have known about that when I’ve talked to them.”

“I was a runner, cross-country mostly because I liked running farther rather than faster. I ran track in spring, but in my high school league, the mile was the longest event. I would have maybe adjusted to the 5-K or the 10-K on track, but...” Bayard shrugged his shoulder. “Mostly I used to visualize competitive events while running in practice. Didn’t do me too much good. Well, I guess I could be proud of finishing ninth at the state championships in my junior year. Had a sciatic nerve irritation my senior year.”

“You did better than I did. I ran cross-country in both high school and college and never had a shot at an individual championship or even a chance to run in a championship meet. Went to MIT, not an athletic powerhouse in general, though you’d be surprised how many nerds are serious runners.”

Mary laughed. “Are you putting yourself in that sort of nerd category?”

“No, but some of my best friends were nerds. In fact, someone going to MIT would be largely friendless if he didn’t like nerds.” After a short pause, Jake confessed, “I guess I am something of a nerd of the corporate capitalist world, though I prefer the term ‘warrior of corporate capitalism.’”

Bayard laughed and when Mary looked at him looking at Jake, she thought she saw some sign of respect.

“I still don’t think that human rights should have ever been extended to corporations.”

Jake pondered the matter for only a second before saying, “Some of my business school professors admitted there are moral problems there, and there is a lack of understanding as well about what we’ve really done and whether we should have done it differently. But corporate capitalism has done so much to improve our lives and to increase our life-spans that it’s definitely more immoral to get rid of it... at least right now when we have no better alternatives.”

“We can return,” said Bayard a bit too aggressively for Mary’s tastes, “to a more basic system of economic freedom and repeal all the laws that give corporations large advantages over families and voluntary associations.”

“And do you have another way of building large automobile assembly plants besides allowing corporations to form and to raise large amounts of money, to organize large numbers of people and coordinate the efforts of smaller companies?”

“No. My point is a moral one. If we were meant to live lives other than those possible in corporate capitalism, then we either have to discover a different way to build automobiles or else we have to do without them. It’s a matter of priorities and some of us think human freedom is more important than 300 horses of power under the hood.”

After Bayard had collapsed into silence, Jake replied, “You might be right in theory. That is, if people in general preferred freedom to powerful cars. Recent history doesn’t support that idea.” In a very soft voice, Jake added, “I’ve been thinking lately about the various problems our society has. I’ve never denied that some of them are due to our economic system, which is not, of course, anywhere close to being a true free enterprise system. I doubt if such a system is possible. If the strong and unscrupulous are unleashed completely, a system would soon enough collapse into a repressive regime of some sort where the strong would create social and legal systems institutionalizing their own power and wealth. The problem is how to balance out the needs of the strong and the aggressive, the risk-takers or even risk-lovers, with those who value security to the point where they’ll accept slavery rather than any sort of freedom which might lead to individual failure and suffering of one sort or another.”

“So, why don’t you work on the problem rather than just working for one of the corporations which is running amok in a society that doesn’t yet understand the dangerous path it has chosen?”

Jake smiled sadly. “All paths are probably dangerous in this world. I don’t know why that is. Some people might point a finger at God and others might have a philosophical explanation, but the dangerous nature of our current path. . . I imagine you mean mostly the dangers we’ve created for individual rights?” Bayard nodded and Jake shrugged as if lost for words.

Silence had reigned for a few moments when Jake turned to Mary and said, “I heard a reliable rumor that an onsite team will be heading up to New Hampshire to finalize some matters for the Baxton acquisition. I assume you’ll be among them, though I didn’t see the list. I might be up there for a day or two, but just to make introductions and maybe give some overall guidance to the people who will be integrating their accounting and planning systems into ours. We may go into a planning cycle for the next fiscal year even before the holidays.”

“Because of the merger?” asked Mary. When Jake nodded, she said, “Mr Simpson told me I’d probably be going up soon, but he didn’t know

any details. He seems depressed as if he knows something that isn't good."

Jake made no comment and Mary wasn't sure if that silence indicated the axe would fall on Mr Simpson.

Jake smiled and said, "I think I better be going. I've got to get up early. Ziggy and I are meeting with the FVTR planning people at eight and he wanted to see me first to make sure we have a good handle on what we want and what we're able to give to them."

Wanting lighten up the mood as Jake was leaving, Mary rose with him and smiled. "We'll have to get together soon for a celebration dinner."

"What are we going to be celebrating?"

"Probably a promotion for you into the uppermost ranks of the newly enlarged FVTR," replied Mary in all seriousness. "Maybe, I'll also be more set in my plans."

After Jake had left, Bayard turned to Mary at the door and reached out to take hold of her hand. "Do you think..." He paused and Mary took one step closer to him, putting her hands upon his chest. "I sort of feel that I'm a lot like Jake in some ways."

"You are," she confirmed. "That's why I'm attracted to both of you." Regretting she'd confirmed even that much, Mary decided not to say another word on that subject, at least not until she and Bayard had settled their plans.

32 The Hovering Axe

“JREI will be spun off as a free-standing real-estate trust, though it is always possible that some larger trust will make an offer. GRF will simply disappear when papers are shuffled during the merger. CMBG will be moved over to FVTR pretty much intact, though I’ve been told there will be reorganizations and. . .” Mary watched as Mr Simpson seemed to be searching for a safe word, but she wasn’t sure whether the criteria of safety had to do with accuracy or corporate politics or. . . “Rationalizations,” was the word that finally emerged before he grew silent, looking down at his desk and not meeting the eyes of the four personnel department managers nor the eyes of Mary Pride who’d been raised to that same level as a special projects expert.

Mary looked over at Janice Johnson, the young Black woman with an MBA from Columbia, two children and a husband who’d been a high-rise construction supervisor until his left leg had been smashed by an I-bar; he was still in the early stages of rehabilitation and had not yet chosen a new career. Hank Peterson was a man in his fifties with one child still in college, not particularly hard-working but quite knowledgeable about the personnel situation at some of CMBG’s companies. Celeste Barton was also middle-aged and was also more valuable for her store of corporate folk-lore than for her work habits, but she was in a better situation than Hank because her husband made a good income as a violinist; he was a member of an active and popular string quartet and he also taught some at Julliard. Hector Sanchez was a young man who had been scheduled to head out to take over the personnel department at a major division based in Tucson. All such moves had been put on hold or canceled, but Hector would have no problems at all that Mary could foresee. He was young and aggressive and had an impressive resumé which included graduate work at the Stanford Business School, where he’d apparently known Jake. Hector

had also completed courses that the Army gave for personnel management.

As for Mary? She was planning to leave soon no matter what happened, but she found it unpleasant to think that circumstances might force her decision.

“This merger shouldn’t turn out badly for most people.” Mr Simpson’s gray face made it appear he felt even less optimistic than his weak statement might have indicated. And he spoke on for a minute or so, speaking in sound-bites, but ones which were more depressing than clearly stated bad news might have been. Mary was getting the feeling that the entire personnel department, at least most of the managers, were not long for the FVTR world. But she asked herself why she should care. And she asked herself why she, and the other five people in the room had dropped their eyes rather than looking at each other.

Somehow, without anyone saying the meeting had ended, it did end and everybody quickly rose as if wishing to scatter before taking a risk of personal contact. And then Mary saw Janice hesitate before heading out the door. Janice turned back in and went to stand over the ashen-faced Mr Simpson. In a voice that threatened to break up, she told him, “You should maybe call your doctor, Herb.”

Mary was going out the door when he responded in a strained voice, “No, the nitro should kick in soon. That’s why I wear the patch.” Not convinced, she walked over to the desk of Mr Simpson’s secretary and told him, “I think you better call the ambulance for the boss.”

* * * * *

It was a few days later that the supervisors of the personnel department were meeting with Hector Sanchez sitting in Mr Simpson’s chair. He cleared his voice. With only a hint of a Nicaraguan accent, he told them, “We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us, people. Not fully pleasant work because we’re preparing for a merger, pending approval of the boards and the SEC, that will leave us with two large headquarters in New York City. That implies we have a lot of redundant staff. At the overview meeting yesterday afternoon, Jake Preskile said that, from FVTR’s point of view, the headquarters staff has been doubled and they will probably only need about one fifth of the additional workers going over from CMBG. If the news isn’t good for us in this building, it will be good for the operating divisions where there are no

anticipated layoffs, only long-range plans to reduce the workforces in those divisions by 5% or so by way of normal attrition.”

Since it was an informal meeting of the personnel department supervisors, Mary felt free to joke: “Are you wishing you were still heading out to Tucson?”

Hector smiled and turned to look at the wet, heavy snow-flakes making a mess of the streets and sidewalks twenty-one floors below. “I’m not too thrilled about a winter that starts with a snow-storm in late October.” He turned back to Mary to smile half-heartedly. He then put on a mask that worried Mary by its stoically official nature. “We may have some unpleasant work to do, especially since the job market is still not good in the City and since we, and our most valued subordinates, may be among our victims.”

“How bad will it be?” Janice’s voice was calm but her face was showing anger as opposed to the fear and uncertainty showing in the faces of Hank and Celeste.

33 Others That Have Different Will Be Given Different

Fed up with all the paperwork for the Homeland Security people as well as for the SEC, Jake felt a need to just walk away from his desk, but he knew he couldn't go far or for long. He walked out of his windowless office, stopping to look quickly at the outside office being prepared for him, but he turned the other way, towards the corner conference room. He strode over to the corner of the windowed walls and dropped his eyes towards the people walking along Avenue of the Americas. While he was there, he felt as if people were still staring at him through the glass walls of the outer offices or the plastic panels of their cubicles. He'd noticed, or at least thought he'd noticed, that a lot of people were looking at him with respect and even a little fear, and some of those people were still officially above him in the CMBG hierarchy.

He returned his attention to the hordes of people moving about on the sidewalks covered with sand and salt. The snow was melting where it had been pushed to the side. Jake peered up into the sky through the tinted glass. The sun was shining brightly and the day was said to be warming up, though he'd not been outside since he'd arrived at work at about seven. He would be here until nearly six when he would catch a cab home to quickly change that he might meet Kirsten and her father for dinner at the Harvard Club. A late dinner, as most were in that family since the men tended to work ten hour days and then spend an hour or so at the gym to keep their 'physical edge' as Jack Kirby liked to phrase it. Kirsten had followed in her father's footsteps and she also kept a similar schedule to him: a hard day's work either punctuated by an hour at the gym or followed by that hour of exercise.

Jake knew that his life was filled with good things and more good things

were appearing on the horizon with each passing day, but he was feeling both restless and tired rather than feeling any sort of satisfaction. He thought he knew why—he was a warrior. As such, he appreciated the rewards but not as much as he had enjoyed the battle. And it hadn't really been much of battle that had recently gone by. The armies had barely started forming when the kings and their war-lords had negotiated a merger of their empires, leaving the warriors frustrated. He was much like an athlete who'd geared up for a big event which had been canceled.

34 Frustrated Desires

Bayard had floundered about the entire day, reading through parts of a book that a Jesuit political scientist had written about liberal learning, a book seeming to contain much good advice about the substance and style of a good education, even containing advice on compensating for a bad education. He had found lists of important books, discussions of the books which serious readers have favored over long periods of time. But then, tired of philosophy and history and deep thoughts, he settled down in the reading room at the library with a copy of *Wise Blood*. He read through the scene where the protagonist and his weird friends had suffered through a sacrilegious parody of a marriage ceremony, the bride being a slutty girl well below legal age for much of anything. To cap it all, that girl had acquired a child in the form of a mummified Indian which had been stolen from a local museum.

Bayard suddenly felt tired. His brain was growing frazzled. . .

The effort of reading *Wise Blood*, while pleasant at one level, had gotten to a point where it had taken as much out of him as his earlier efforts to read *Nicomachean Ethics*. And so it was that he checked the novel out of the library, thinking he might read it in bed while trying to go to sleep. And then he headed to Mary's apartment rather than his own, as he had been doing for the past week or so. The two of them had settled into quiet evenings over the past two weeks since the announcement that Mary's company was merging with another huge corporation, huge by Bayard's standards though the combined company was going to barely make it into the top 100 in the list compiled by *Fortune* each year of the largest American manufacturing companies.

Bayard was realizing that he and Mary were in some sort of process of incorporation, as much as the term sent shivers through his soul. Their incorporation needed the legal incorporation of a marriage license, to be

sure, but the problem for now was that of a consummation into a more complete incorporation. And another shiver went through his soul at the realization that he was, in his own way, worse than Jake or most of his kind. Bayard was coming to know himself a bit better and had realized he was so abstract in his thoughts as to be susceptible to corporate ways of thought, corporate ways of perception, but. . .

Perhaps it was people of more concrete ways of thought who were more likely to get caught up in corporate organizations and corporate modes of behavior. . .

Bayard thought it likely that forms of social organization would be reflected somewhat in the brains and minds of members of that society, but it would not be a simple, mirror-like reflection but rather a refraction. . . Yes, that was better, a refraction like the stick which seems to be bent when it's placed in the water. But a refraction probably more mutated than that simple stick in the water—the human mind was an interactive entity and the society with which it was interacting was itself a dynamic, pulsating, life-like entity.

And Bayard's mind spun back to where he had been and he realized that he had meant to tell himself only that he and Mary, in some ways, were already acting as if they were a couple married for a good long time. They came home exhausted and each read until Mary headed in to her bedroom and Bayard headed for the subway to return to his miserable apartment. But, unlike that long-married couple, there was no moral way to release the feelings of sexual tension that each of them endured.

Coming to himself just as he turned onto Mary's street, Bayard looked up to see a familiar figure ahead of him and he called out, "Hey there, sailor girl." Three women turned to look at him, and of the three, it was Mary's smile that was most forced, most artificial. She paused just long enough for him to come alongside her and then they walked on silently for the few seconds it took to reach her apartment building. And they still had not spoken when they entered her apartment, Bayard placing his backpack, with its books and notebooks, against the couch, Mary grimacing as if she were suddenly annoyed by such an object being in such a place. After closing the door, she walked by him, curving her body so as to not touch him.

They had a quick and simple meal of grilled cheese sandwiches and canned soup and then each settled down. Still had there been few words spoken. Still was Mary annoyed and Bayard wondered if there was some-

thing he should be doing to make her feel better, but he came up with no solutions he considered to be moral. He was afraid that they would break up soon if he didn't do something, but felt it was still too early to do what needed to be done.

Marriage. . .

But he knew there to be a more immediate way to ease the tension and it was that obvious solution to their urges that was troublesome: the solution advocated, implicitly or explicitly, in so much modern entertainment and even in so much of the books written by respected intellectuals in various fields.

But Bayard wasn't about to give in. He was determined to fight against the degrading ideas pushed into his head during all those years of watching movies and television shows in which human beings were depicted in a bestial fashion. Not that he thought sex was at all degrading, though it was pretty preposterous as many humorists had pointed out. The human sex act was proof, he'd read, that God had a sense of humor.

"You know, Mary. . ." And he stood and went to sit beside her on the couch, she still barely acknowledging his presence. . .

He put his arm around her cold shoulders and told her, "I'm in as much agony as you are, but there are proper ways to handle things and you told me yourself that we need a little time before committing our lives to each other. I just think we should be ready to make that commitment before we. . ."

She loosened a little but continued to glare down at the novel which she had been reading, with little movement of pages, for the past week that he'd been spending at the apartment, and for another week before that, as she had told him.

"Well," he confessed as he sat back and left his arm loosely draped on the couch behind Mary, "I guess we have an enigma here ourselves. If not an enigma of arrival, it's an enigma of entry. . ."

And she turned and slugged him one on the chest hard enough to make him catch his breath. Bayard tightened up his embrace around Mary's shoulders and kissed her on the top of the head before moving a foot or so away. For another half-hour or so, they each read, sometimes touching each other upon the forearm or even the thigh, and then Bayard left to take the subway to that miserable apartment.

35 Throwing Oil on the Flames of Desire

Kirsten laughed and threw herself into Jake's arms, forcing him to lift her and carry her up the last flight of stairs to his apartment. She laughed again as she refused to get down, forcing him to fumble about with the key and the lock, her dress overflowing upon his hands so that he couldn't see what he was doing. After a few seconds, he managed to fit the key into the lock, and she looked at him, taking his face between her hands and kissing him before asking him, "Do you always fumble when you try to fit things into a tight space?"

Jake leaned his face forward trying to catch her lips but she leaned away from him, nearly tumbling from his arms and laughing again as he stumbled forward to keep her from falling forward out of his arms. And he kept stumbling forward even after he'd regained his balance, coming to a stop only to dump her on his couch. As he turned and went back to close the door to his apartment, he heard her groaning and laughing at once. Mr Cohen was standing at his doorway across the hallway, and he caught Jake's attention; he winked and gave Jake the thumb's up before turning to go back into his own apartment. After the friendly old man had disappeared, Jake stood for a few seconds, staring out into the hallway. When he got back to Kirsten, she was looking almost sober and was staring up at him with those wonderfully large brown eyes.

"What was that all about?"

"One of my neighbors just wished me good luck with you. Do you think I'll have some good luck with you?"

She smiled and said, "You'll have to earn your way with me, boy. Luck will have nothing to do with it."

Suddenly, Jake felt in a more gentle mood and he sat on the edge of the

couch and lifted Kirsten up enough to take off her jacket, but she arched her back, pushed to the side with her hips, driving him off the couch. He'd not recovered before she had come over the side of the couch and gotten him down and pinned him, her knees on both sides of his hips and most of her weight upon his thighs, her hands holding his to the floor at the side of his head. As if in explanation, she told him, "I missed my hour at the gym today."

And soon, they were entangled in each other's clothes and limbs. Kirsten's old-fashioned nylon stockings on a garter belt—which she wore when she was in a retro-mood—were a particular problem. But it didn't take long for Jake to somewhat clear the way to Kirsten's body; he found himself on top, working his way from Kirsten's head to Kirsten's toes, struggling his way through his own belt and her blouse and the garter belt snapped and bruised his cheek while he was halfway down or so and then her skirt was suddenly wrapped about her left knee and then around his right wrist and . . .

It was all very confusing and even somewhat hazardous, though he met with nothing else so painful as that stretched garter belt. And he rolled off her, offering a chance to cuddle up to him, cradled in his left arm. She wasn't interested, but she did look to be pleased and amused, though not yet completely free of her clothes and his.

"Why'd we have to do that like it was Rocky's last fight?"

She laughed and asked, "You mean *Rocky in the Laundromat*?" She laughed again. "Why'd you find it so hard to get everything out of the way?" He looked at her suspiciously and her face collapsed into an expression of innocence appropriate for a Shirley Temple doll. "I said you'd have to earn your way with me." And then she shrugged her shoulders and lay back. But she quickly sat up, as Jake watched her bare breasts moving about. "You must have a more comfortable bed than this, Inn-keep."

"You know darned well where the bed is."

Kirsten looked about her, a dazed look in her eyes as if the alcohol had suddenly returned to her system. "Have I been here before? It does look vaguely familiar. I wonder who I was with?"

Jake sighed in a way meant to display his patience and then he rose and walked over to the liquor cabinet where vodka and gin and vermouth and a few other liquids had been added to what had once been a small, dusty collection consisting of a bottle of Jack Daniels, a bottle of mid-range Scotch, and one of Drambuie. For some reason, he had been drinking

rusty nails earlier in the year, but no longer. Now, he seemed to be drinking everything, from five minutes after he got out of the gym—typically a game of handball with Jack Kirby, sometimes Kevin Kirby—until he collapsed into his bed at night. He was not so young as he had been in college and it was getting to him, though Kirsten seemed able to party through the evening, sleep for four hours, and then get up ready for a hard day's work.

“What’s your pleasure?”

“A gin something. Maybe a fizz. Maybe a sloe fizz. Maybe a Collins. Surprise me and I’ll go make myself comfortable.”

Jake made a very weak gin and tonic and made his way into the bedroom, noticing her bra a few feet down the hallway. He walked a couple steps more and nearly tripped over his underpants. He was inside the bedroom and approaching the queen-sized bed with its restless hump when he stepped on one of her shoes and his leg buckled. Catching himself before falling, or spilling Kirsten’s drink, he continued walking towards the bed, his heart full of both regret and desire.

After placing the drink on his nightstand, he sat on the edge of the bed and reached over to stroke her hair, a thick lock of which was plastered to her cheek by sweat. Though restless, she seemed to be sleeping, not just unconscious, but sleeping. And, now that he thought of it, she was usually a restless sleeper even when she went to bed stone-cold sober. Which was more than half the time to be sure, but he was hoping for better than that after they married.

He reached over and moved a lock of her hair into place and then stroked her cheek. She smiled and filled his insides with a desire that had not yet been met; he spun around and flipped himself so that he was curled up a little. Then he pulled her to the inside of the arc formed by his body. This time, she didn’t resist his gentle tugs. He held her loosely, stroking her upper back and then her lower back and then her buttocks, taking nearly ten minutes to make that journey.

With all the frustrations Jake was currently feeling, he thought that life was good. Not always so easy to deal with. But good.

A lot would be expected from him at work and it looked as if a lot would also be expected from him in his personal life. Seven evenings in two weeks, he had been together with Kirsten and five times they’d ended up in the bedroom. She wasn’t a girl who delayed her gratification, but Jake couldn’t claim any better on his own part. . .

Though they both had worked so hard, delaying a variety of gratifica-

tions over the years of their youth that they might reach their goals. Jake began to wonder if there were goals worthy of delaying gratification and other goals not so worthy, but he decided to make his usual effort to shut his mind off so that he might go to sleep. With his tongue in the middle of his mouth and his mind working on an image of a Cape Cod beach on a July evening, he pulled Kirsten tighter against his belly and chest.

36 The Ties that Bind

When Jake arrived at his secretary's desk the next morning, she wore a strange expression that he couldn't interpret though it seemed somewhat stern, as if she were ready to scold him for something. Not a word did he speak when she handed him but one pink message slip from the pile in front of her. He looked at it and saw that his father had called and he didn't believe in calling people at work unless. . .

Jake nearly knocked down one of the mail-delivery boys as he ran into his office. Slamming the door behind him, he picked up the phone's handset and his hand froze over the keypad. He looked around frantically and saw he'd thrown his briefcase on the floor back near the door. Running to fetch it, he nearly ripped it apart trying to open it before he decided to punch the combination into the lock. A few seconds later, he was back at his desk, paging through his blackbook and suddenly ashamed that he'd called his parents so infrequently that he didn't even know the number to their new house. New, but they'd been there for nearly six months, deciding to downsize after his sister Carol had moved into her boyfriend's apartment. "How much room do we need for me and Dad and Rascal?" his mother had asked.

With his heart beating so that he feared a heart-attack to double his father's woes, Jake waited for seven rings before the phone was picked up, and he heard Carol say, "Hello, this is the Preskile house."

"Carol," and he found himself unable to say another word.

There was only a second of silence before Carol asked, "Jake, are you all right?"

"I'm just. . . Is Mom. . ."

Mercifully, Carol jumped in at his pause and said, "Last night. She wasn't feeling much pain at the end so far as we could tell."

"Why didn't you call me? Does Bob know?"

“He’s been here since Thursday. He and Denice have been a blessing for Dad. He wouldn’t leave Mom’s bedside except when Denice or me or the nurse would come in to help Mom in little ways and then Bob would take Dad out to his recliner or sometimes he got him out of Mom’s room and into. . .” Her voice cracked for just a fraction of a second before she pulled in a deep breath and finished, “the second bedroom for a nap.”

“Why didn’t Dad call me?”

“He knew you were busy and you know how he is. He didn’t really call Bob either. Bob called and suspected something. He put Denice on the phone and she got it out of Dad. They were on the next eastbound plane out of San Francisco.”

“Why didn’t you or Bob call me?”

Silence reigned until he heard his father’s voice, “Jake?”

“Dad. I can catch a plane up to Hartford before the morning is out.” He did a couple of calculations in his head, wondering if Amtrak up to Springfield might be quicker, but decided to stick with the plane, figuring. . .

Would Kirsten go with him?

He knew Charlotte would, if he asked her, but then his family would assume. . .

“Dad, I’m messing up badly.”

“Messing up? You’re a big success down there in New York City. Don’t blame yourself, Jake, that you weren’t up here. I was the one who didn’t call, but you know what me and Mom. . .” The old man’s voice, and it was sounding like the voice of an old man, faded away. A few sobs could be heard and then he heard Bob’s voice, “Jake?”

“Bob, can you pick me up at Bradley?”

“Billy went back home. . . He lives in Vernon now, and he told Dad he’d wait until we got hold of you before he drives back up here with Janice. She’s been pretty sick with her pregnancy and he didn’t bring her up for the. . .” Bob’s voice didn’t crack but there was a second or two of silence before he said, “Let us know what flight you catch and Billy and Janice can pick you up.”

Jake’s stomach was sinking. He had known his mother was sick and hadn’t gotten hold of her, but that was no reason for. . .

He hadn’t known she was on her death-bed. He hadn’t known his baby brother had moved down to Vernon. He hadn’t known that Janice was pregnant. He felt dizzy, as if he was at the top of some great summit and looking down to. . .

An image came of the time he'd gone to the very edge of the wall of rock overlooking Yosemite's campgrounds and restaurants and other tourist traps. A long way down that had been. A half-mile? He didn't know, but remembered the two women he was with had shrieked at seeing him walk out to the edge like that, but he had simply never been the type to feel vertigo.

As he put down the hand-set, Jake's head was spinning. His heart was also aching as he wondered if there was any chance that Kirsten would go up with him. He wasn't sure how long he was frozen looking at the phone before he heard the door open. Ziggy stood there, biting his lip, and then the man of action closed the door behind him. After also shutting the blinds on the glass wall to the inside of the building, he turned and walked over next to Jake. The elder warrior forced the younger warrior into his chair and then asked in the gentlest voice that Jake had ever heard from him: "Was it your mother?" When Jake nodded, Ziggy told him, "Have yourself a good cry, Kid. I'll get Ida to make the reservations to Bradley. It's Thursday and next week's Thanksgiving. And you should stay up there as long as your father needs you. And as long as you need him." Jake's head shot up and he glared at Ziggy at that last statement. The older man quietly left.

Jake was tearless and staring at an eraser on his desk when the phone rang. He stared at it for a couple of ring's worth of time, but then picked it up, feeling Ida wouldn't have put it through unless. . .

"Jake." Kirsten's voice was more subdued than he'd ever heard it being. When he didn't respond for a few seconds, she asked, "Will you be ready in forty-five minutes? Ziggy had Ida make the reservations for us before he called me, and I'll run by your apartment and pick up some clothes for you. Uncle Kevin put his limo and driver at my service."

In a voice so flat that it scared him, Jake said, "I'll be ready. I'm ready now."

* * * * *

Billy put the suitcases down at the back of the maroon mini-van. Looking over at Jake, he told him, "This is a loaner from Janice's parents. Our car is pretty unreliable and her dad made me take this one and leave our junker with him in Orange when I was up there last weekend." He smiled uncertainly at Kirsten, and Jake was happy to see her smile back at Billy,

her manner neither pretentious nor condescending. He wondered if she had been influenced by Billy's resemblance to Jake; if not for the seven year age difference, they could have been twins. But, no, Jake walked around to the side of the mini-van as Billy was introducing Kirsten to Janice, and Kirsten smiled in a friendly and open manner, though Billy's twenty year-old wife gave a first impression of being both too sweet for this world and also not bright enough to take care of herself. Still, Billy loved her and...

As they took their places in the backseat, Kirsten put her hand on Jake's hand resting upon his own knee. She smiled at him, sadly and sympathetically while his head was spinning. Not recovered from his guilt over being a bad son... and bad brother... and bad brother-in-law, he was now wondering if he had underestimated Kirsten's moral qualities. And then he felt more guilty as an image of Charlotte passed through his mind.

As if she were detecting his thoughts, Kirsten squeezed his hand and he looked over to see her expression had strengthened a bit beyond sympathetic. Jake wondered...

37 The Missionaries Would Not Have Approved

On the first Friday of December, Bayard walked the streets alone feeling frustrated and weak. He and Mary were getting close to sleeping together. He could feel it though not a word had been mentioned. And he was determined not to do it; not until they were married. He was beginning to wish he'd never been in the habit of watching television or movies. His head was filled with too many ideas which worked against his idea of making a commitment before...

He walked on, parts of himself seeming to war against other parts. And so it was that he reached Central Park with its landscape still partly green and not at all purified by snow. He was hoping for some peace and quiet, but ahead he saw a small crowd gathered around someone standing upon a box of some sort. As Bayard came within twenty feet of the people, he began to hear a voice driven by a powerful set of lungs. Rhythmic. Sing-song. A few more steps and Bayard could make out some of the words:

In prosperity people lose their good sense,
they become no better than dumb animals.
So they go on in their self-assurance,
right up to the end they are content with their lot.

Bayard smiled at the man with the graying beard going nearly to his belly-button. His hair was clean-looking but tangled badly as it fell past his shoulders. He'd stopped his chanting and was staring at Bayard as if he were trying to push through a secret communication. Their eyes locked and Bayard saw the outermost inner regions of a person intelligent and horribly focused. Bayard broke away from the man's gaze and walked rapidly away, even as the chant picked up again.

“What is that poem he’d been reciting with great power?”

Soon enough, he was approaching the Reservoir and was being passed by runners and joggers, the occasional race-walker as well. Feeling a tap on his shoulder, he turned quickly to his right and saw Jake smiling back at him as he ran on towards the running path circling the water. There was a certain quiet desperation unto despair in the way the young executive was running, and it reminded Bayard of Dustin Hoffman in that crazy movie about the diamonds and the Nazi dentist.

But maybe it wasn’t desperation on Jake’s part so much as intensity. A certain kind of focus. And Bayard jerked to a halt, turning partway to look back at the man chanting words of doom upon his box. Then he looked forward, though Jake had disappeared around a bend in the path. A shake of his head was not enough to clear inappropriate analogies from Bayard’s head and he turned back, deciding he’d just go to Mary’s apartment and wait for her.

* * * * *

Bayard let himself into Mary’s apartment. She had given him a key though he was not living there, though they’d still not slept together after nearly four weeks of knowing each other and being together in other ways—and, “Why,” he wondered, “did it always come down to that.” Why did he find himself slipping so often into thoughts of bedding Mary down? He wanted to think through some possible futures for them after they left New York City. He wanted to imagine Mary with their first baby at her breast. He wanted to imagine Mary working with his mother to build up that wholesale furniture business. He wanted to imagine himself a respected social critic.

He had admitted to his exasperated. . .

Was Mary a girl-friend? A fiancée who’d not yet received an official proposal? A lover in an affair not yet consummated? Was there such a thing as an unconsummated affair or were all such relationships yet potential affairs?

In a conversation a few nights prior, Bayard had told Mary that he’d sleep with her before an official ceremony if they were settled down together somewhere, but. . .

She had professed indifference to the entire matter and then had spoken in support of his ‘commitment to commitment’ as she had laughingly termed

it, though her humor had seemed a bit forced to him.

Closing his eyes, Bayard did his best to will away the tenseness unto pain that he carried always with him in his brain and in his groin. After a few seconds, he took a deep breath, pushed away the pain for the nonce and opened his eyes to take a look around the living-room of Mary's apartment. It was a more pleasant place than his own apartment and she had done much to make it more like home, though she had confessed to feeling it was but a way-station on the way to some unknown destination, one she wasn't sure she was going to like even as much as this one.

He loved this apartment more than she did, but his real reason for that love was the way that Mary's presence permeated the place to the extent where he felt himself drowning in the very smells of her favorite soaps and perfumes the instant he walked in that front door.

He shook his head, trying to drive away pleasantly dangerous lines of thought. And then Bayard went into the second bedroom of the apartment, where he had a desk covered with books and writing-pads. But he was feeling restless and turned around without so much as sitting down at the desk. He left that bedroom and walked into the bathroom and the first thing he saw was her sports-bra and running pants hanging from the rod for the shower-curtain. He quickly did his business and left that room, trying not to look at her intimate clothes, trying not to think of the subtle curves of Mary's body.

And he found himself back in the living-room, feeling frustrated and restless. He went to Mary's small bookcase and looked over a few titles before pulling out a collection of the writings of de Touqueville, but he almost immediately put it back, knowing it wasn't much lighter than the works by Adam Smith, Eric Voegelin, and Bertrand de Jouvenel which were in his backpack. His eyes passed over her slip-cased set of *Little House on the Prairie* books given to her by her grandfather for her twelfth birthday. And his gaze had not yet focused on anything else when the door opened and Mary walked in, an expression of anger upon her face. Bayard felt his insides melting as he walked over and offered her his arms. She pushed him away and walked by, going into her bedroom and slamming the door.

A few minutes later, she came out and walked into the kitchen where he was putting the kettle on to boil. She didn't say a word but apologetically brushed against him as she walked by to fetch a different sort of tea-bag than the tension-reliever herbal tea he'd pulled down from the shelf. She fetched herself an herbal tea of a sort advertised to increase energy and

Bayard was tempted to wrest it from her hand and force her to use the tension-relieving variety, but...

And then he said, "What the hell," and grabbed the tea-bag from Mary's hand, throwing it casually over his shoulder and hearing it hit against the wall not so very far away. He put his arms around her and she melted into him, and his hand immediately moved from her back to the front of her body. The instant his thumb began working his way around Mary's swelling nipple, he knew he'd been beaten. Maybe he could have fought all the images pushed into his mind by those books and movies and television shows, but he was not capable of holding out against the arguments of her body. He wanted her, and he panted to her, "Your image, your smell, the sound of your voice, is always with me. It's as if you've taken control of my insides."

As he heard the confession coming from his mouth, Bayard expected Mary to smile at him in a manner both amused and respectful of him. He was slightly surprised when she passed him a very serious expression and took his face between her hands, pulling his lips down a few inches to meet hers. As if reflections and odors and thoughts of Mary were not already occupying enough of his insides, he soon found her minty and musky breath filling his mouth and throat. He moved his arms to wrap them around her body, forcing her hands down to his shoulders and he turned her head to make it more comfortable for both of them. For the first time in months, Bayard heard no voices of debate in his mind. The needs of society and the problems of a morally decaying society seemed to be the concerns of another place and time. He lifted her and carried her down the hallway to her bedroom.

To his own surprise, he gently threw her on her bed. When she looked up in surprise, he threw himself down on top of her, but making sure he caught his own body weight on his hands and knees. And they were soon wrestling, each of them struggling to find the ticklish spots of each other.

It didn't take long before Bayard found himself on top of Mary on the floor beside her bed, the two of them wrapped in sheets and blankets and comforters. And both of them were laughing hysterically when...

Mary grew still and seemed to be listening for something. Bayard paused and also listened. And she laughed again and punched him playfully in the chest just as he heard a whistling sound. "You put the kettle on to boil. You better go get it before the bottom melts off."

* * * * *

Bayard heard voices in Mary's apartment when he was returning from the Chinese restaurant a few city blocks away. Even before he opened the door, he suspected it was Jake. Mary had told him that Jake had returned from his mother's funeral on Monday, just the day before. He had called to thank her for the contribution she and Bayard had sent up to the Preskile's church in memorial for Jake's mother. Mary had told Bayard she'd talked a while with Jake. She'd not gotten many details but had gotten the impression that Jake's relationship with Kirsten was troubled but far from breaking up—for good or bad. Bayard had not told Mary that he'd seen Jake with that other woman a couple of times, once after he'd returned from his mother's funeral. Pausing outside the door for a few seconds, Bayard reminded himself to speak carefully in front of either Mary or Jake.

Still, he liked Jake and he didn't have to force a smile as he looked at the young corporate executive. "Hi, Jake. You staying for food?" He lifted the bag. "Mary's still on her semi-vegetarian kick but I got spare-ribs and some beef and broccoli."

"Mary already invited me. And congratulations. I hear this Chinese food is all the poor girl will get until you pick up a ring for her."

Bayard smiled and felt the blood run to his head, and he heard Mary giggle before Jake saved him by saying, "I'll nibble a little, but I've got to go soon. I just came by to see if you and Mary have firmed up your plans yet, and I found out you'd firmed up one part of your plan. I heard about an opening for a personnel manager up in the Athol area when I was home for my mother's funeral. A couple of local investors bought the company my father works for, and they're planning on expanding greatly. Specialized metal-cutters and such. Very high-precision and very high-tech from what I understood but my father didn't really have too many details. He was already planning to retire and now he says he doesn't feel much like working at all. So, Dad isn't paying too much attention to the goings-on at his company."

"I'm sorry about your mother. I heard and I should have said something when I saw you the other day..." Bayard caught himself before adding, "with Charlotte," but Jake didn't seem disturbed at the mention of that casual meeting as he responded, "You and Mary sent the contribution and those nice cards, to Dad and to me. It's not the sort of thing you want to

mention every time you run into someone on the street.”

Telling himself that Athol didn't sound so good as northern Vermont, Bayard didn't know what else to say for a second or two, but he did realize it was best not to burn any bridges. Mary's face was placid, giving him no clues as to her attitude. “Well, that's nice of you to be looking out for opportunities for us. It'll be something for Mary to consider. We're each up in the air and...” He stopped himself from saying more than he knew and left himself and his companions dangling.

Mary laughed in a way that let Bayard know she was still in a very good mood and then she rose. “Why don't we all go into the kitchen and eat while the food is still hot.”

On his way out of the living-room, Bayard asked, “You have plans for this weekend, Jake?”

“A quiet evening tonight, Buddy. A quiet evening. Tomorrow we go to some shindig for the retirement of one of the senior partners at Kirsten's firm. She's a little disappointed. She'd been hoping he'd hold on for another year or two because she expects to be the leading candidate for a senior partnership by then. As it is...” Jake shrugged before saying, “She's pretty sure the slot will be offered to a nice fellow, an immigrant from Germany that I've met a few times. Ziggy thinks she's right that Hans will get the promotion.” Jake shrugged again, feigning an indifference that Bayard thought appropriate to people who knew they were going to be successful someday, so that delays weren't too much of a bother.

The two men reached the kitchen to find Mary had already fetched plates and silverware and was setting the table, though she and Bayard had gotten into the habit of taking their plates into the living-room where they talked and listened to music while eating. She proposed, “Why don't we just eat here at the kitchen table, kind of like civilized folk?”

“Civilized folk dress up formal every night to go to the Harvard Club or they file into the formal dining room to see what masterpiece of the culinary art has been prepared by the cook and will be served by the butler.”

Bayard just looked at Jake, not sure what to make of the remark or the tone of voice which had been strained more than joking. Out of the corner of his eyes, he could see Mary had dropped her eyes to concentrate on setting out the containers of food. After a short silence, she told Jake, “Ziggy and Mr Osborne, even Mr Thornsby—as formal as he seems, lead nice, normal lives. They live in nicer homes than most folk and drive Jaguars and vacation in five-star hotels in Europe. But, mostly, they are

Hemingway's rich folk, different from us in having more money. That's all. I can even imagine Ziggy sitting in front of a TV, beer-can in hand, watching the Giants or the Knicks."

"That's not the Kirbys. The money has been in the family for a good four generations now. As much as this country allows it, that family is aristocratic and so are the families with whom they socialize. In general. Sometimes, Jack kicks back and invites people like the Robinsons."

"Jake." Mary's voice had a scolding tone. "You know you're crazy about Kirsten. If you and she can agree on a life you can share, then you'll just have to put up with the hardships of entering a wealthy and powerful family." She just smiled as she turned towards the refrigerator and Bayard looked over to see Jake lighten up a little.

Part VI

The Road Goes on Forever

38 An Opportunity Once Again

It was Friday with Christmas only days away and Jake was in his new office in the FVTR building, sorting the mail brought over from his office in the CMBG building. He was having to operate with two offices and two secretaries, though he was using his CMBG office mostly for interviews with executives for input to the planning process. It was a hassle but he wasn't going to complain since his main office was just down the hall from Mr Snowden and Ziggy and Tracy Rogers. And he wasn't going to complain about being put in charge of the process of providing one-year and five-year plans that would provide guidelines for integrating the two companies. At the age of twenty-nine, he was helping to merge and reshape two large corporations, though, even combined, they admittedly were not exactly General Motors. Others from MIT and Stanford Business School had accomplished still more than he had at such an age, but he figured he wasn't doing too bad for a boy from a blue-collar family in Athol.

He kept working his way through the pile of mail, which had already been filtered by his secretaries, each of whom had taken on the responsibility of dealing with part of his routine mail. His work in helping to combine the future operations of FVTR and CMBG was just too important to be interrupted, even by related work. He had been forced to attend one meeting with the corporate image consultants who were working on a way to most favorably present the merger to the general public, but everyone was far more concerned about corporate clients of FVTR and CMBG, both of which names were to disappear before long. The last Jake had heard VICA was the favorite new name, but it was only certain that the new name would have some zing, some 'sex appeal' as the image consultants put it in their memos on the subject.

And soon enough he'd have a high-powered assistant, some one much like himself but a little younger and less experienced. Personnel had promised to send up resumées of good candidates that afternoon; he was hoping to be shortly relieved of part of his burden. Jake took a few seconds to turn around and look out at the gray skies. Not so bad a sight to one who liked an occasional snowstorm, however much even one day of shutdown could cost the business community in New York City. He had just returned his attention to the pile of mail when he heard the door open and looked up to see the grinning face of Ziggy advancing his way. Jake returned the grin and asked, "What's up, Hot-shot?"

"Oh, a hell of a lot, Jake. You got my phone message that Bill Clemens left?"

"Yep. That was a foregone conclusion since you had been promoted into his job and there was no where else for him to go. He wasn't the sort to accept a role as messenger boy for even Caleb Snowden. And he was little more than that for the past few weeks. He wasn't even always being invited into the planning committee meetings."

"Well, neither am I, but I'm too busy trying to grab control of the operations of these two companies, each of which is a bit lacking in the integration thing. I'll let you guys worry about planning for three years from now, and you'll have to deal with the fact that I'm creating a different company than the one you all are planning for."

Despite the joking nature of Ziggy's words, there was something about the tone of Ziggy's voice which led Jake to sit back and prepare for... something.

"Clemens gave his letter of resignation to Caleb on Thursday morning though nobody told me or Tracy until the end of the day. By eight this morning, he'd managed to join with Calvin Fowler to stir up Hutcheson and Home, the outfit from Scotland which owns a chunk of CMBG stock after buying the MacLaurin investment bank in Canada."

"Amazing. We were so ignored and undervalued and yet we were heavily represented in portfolios of a number of sophisticated investors. Anyway... Is there anything we should be worried about?"

"We shouldn't take them too lightly. Angus Macpherson, the top honcho at Hutcheson, is personally involved and he can call on a lot of deep-pocket investors all over the world. But Clemens and Fowler have overestimated the hidden values in the two companies. We can convince Macpherson of the true situation, that is..." Ziggy paused and grinned still more broadly, "We can show them your estimation of the values, hidden and visible, in

these two companies and Macpherson will shy away from a hostile bid—which really isn't his style anyway. I suspect that he's agreed to go along with Fowler and Clemens mostly to see what's going on with this company whose stock he inherited. So to speak.”

“Yeah, I've certainly heard of Angus Macpherson. He's a big boy, physically and financially. From what I remember, he'd been concentrating his company's money and efforts in Australia. I'm surprised he even bought into Canada so heavily, though I did hear that MacLaurin was on the auction block because of disagreements between the younger partners and some who were about to retire. It was going to be hard for the rich, old boys to get their cash out of MacLaurin without a third party coming in and buying them all out.” Jake thought for a few seconds and asked Ziggy, “You got the specifics on the estimate that Fowler and Clemens have put on FVTR and CMBG?”

“No, in fact, all argumentative bullshit aside, it isn't clear they have a definite idea of the worth of CMBG. It's not even clear they're targeting both companies. They might be aiming for a breakup of the proposed merger as part of their plan, whether that plan is definite or vague. The lovable duo have simply requested a chance to make a presentation to the new combined board before the merger proceeds any further.”

“New combined board?”

“Tentatively formed. Heavy, for now, in executives from the two companies, but that includes a couple who are set to retire within a couple of years, from the board as well as from their executive positions.”

Jake paused but decided not to ask who it was who agreed to be gently purged. It wasn't that hard to guess, starting with Mr Thornsby and maybe Mr Osborne. He called up the summary exhibit from his report on unrealized values in CMBG and FVTR, though he had less confidence in his analysis of FVTR. No matter how much information they had provided to him, he didn't yet have a feel for the company or its customers or its personnel.

Ziggy seemed to be waiting for some sort of response and Jake gave it to him: “No way they can do much, unless they want to risk losing their shirts. The modernization costs for the operating divisions... Yeah, for the foreseeable future,” spoke Jake with his eyes on his computer monitor though he knew the numbers by heart, “the dividend payout to stockholders isn't even expected to be great. We're looking like a high-tech start-up company in that a lot of cash will be chewed up in the modernization

and expansion efforts that are necessary to actually realize those so-called hidden values. I mean, an analyst would have to be pretty ignorant of the situation to think that those unrealized values represent actual piles of cash or liquid assets which can be pulled out. There are some piles of cash but they're needed for the upgrading and modernizing of manufacturing and supply distribution facilities and equipment."

With a smile and a wink just as Jake looked up, Ziggy informed him, "I'm glad you're confident enough to make the presentation to the board and to Macpherson. We'll meet with Macpherson and we'll bring him over to our side and Fowler will have to take the same offer that FVTR will be making for CMBG stock. He might not even get the usual going-away present that nuisances of that sort often manage to get."

"Shouldn't be too much of a problem to convince Macpherson that we're a good deal but not so good a deal that any smart investor would beat the FVTR offer. As far as I can figure out, FVTR is making a fair offer for a buyout which would be a merger of equals except that they took the initiative and ended up on top. If one of the real big boys came in, they might be able to pay more than we're worth to FVTR, *if* we happened to fit into their plans... Conceivably, someone with very deep pockets and a long-range view could buy both companies for more than we're worth on paper, but I don't see that happening. There aren't even any rumors of anyone looking at us, besides Fowler and other opportunistic feeders."

"Well, I'm sure you'll find just the balance of viewpoints. We know we're good companies with good bright futures but not so bright, relative to our stock prices, that someone can swoop in and make an immediate profit. Anyway, I'll leave that in your capable hands. Just be ready to talk about it this afternoon when Kevin Kirby comes by. We'll be meeting with him and Tracy and you'll probably be on call to present the results to Caleb tomorrow morning." Ziggy rose and turned towards the door but turned back to say, "By the way, Kevin pulled Kirsten off the project because of your relationship with her. You may not even know this yet, but she's also going to be busy on a project with her father and the two of them will be on their way to Hong Kong within the next day or two."

Jake shrugged. "This is probably outside her expertise anyway at this point. She knows investment law and she knows the SEC and state regulations. This is risk analysis and poker playing."

"I wouldn't underestimate her ability at the poker table, Jake. I've lost a few hundred to her in one night." Ziggy narrowed his eyes a bit as

he stared at Jake, but then he lightened up and laughed. “Anyway, this might be less like poker and more like chicken on the highway, and the way I see it: Bill Clemens and Calvin Fowler are driving what seems to be a lightweight sports car right at Caleb Snowden as he cruises along steadily in his comfortable Caddie.”

* * * * *

Jake moved into the summary phase of his presentation with the bar chart displaying the market value of CMBG, which was basically GRF less the real estate operations. Then he overlaid a chart adding on the unrealized value already assumed in FVTR’s offered price. On top of that he added another chart showing the additional value which might be realized under assumptions of very high growth in the aerospace industry which was unlikely to occur without a major decrease in oil prices or a large-scale military build-up in the the United States and allied countries on top of what had already happened in response to problems with terrorist nations. Jake had found a report in FVTR’s files, commissioned from a big-name international security consulting firm, that claimed it was unlikely that voters in the Western countries would tolerate a further build-up unless an enemy on the scale of Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia appeared.

Ziggy cut in, “Well, Mr Macpherson, do you think any respectable company can come up with a competing bid under these circumstances?”

Jake found himself once more preparing to concentrate upon every sound falling from the lips of the gentleman from Edinburgh. He was watching those very lips as if he would need every clue to hear the words through the thick burr which issued from under the bushy gray mustaches. Huge those mustaches, like large scrub brushes fastened to a face, but Angus Macpherson was himself so big as to easily support them. Jake thought the man was probably about six, four and carried more than three hundred pounds on a very big-boned frame. After a few seconds of meeting Ziggy’s gaze, Mr Macpherson breathed deeply and, as befitted such an important man, took his time before saying, “As you present the facts, it would be hard to justify a competing bid.” And then the big man accepted a piece of paper from his assistant, a younger, blonde man who would have looked large himself next to nearly anyone but Angus Macpherson. A nod in the general direction of his assistant and then he turned to Jake and nodded again, in

a respectful manner. “Thank you, Mr Preskile, for a most informative presentation.”

There was silence for a moment or two before Angus Macpherson turned to Ziggy and said, “You seem as committed to this buy-out as the FVTR people are.” The two men looked into each other’s eyes for just a few seconds before Mr Macpherson turned his steady but surprisingly wet gaze upon Sven. “I believe that Mr Snowden is on call. . .” Sven just nodded. “I think it be time for the three of us to talk and talk seriously.”

It was Ziggy who suggested, “Why don’t we have lunch brought in for us here? The caterer is waiting just down the hall. It will take Mr Snowden at least forty-five minutes to get over here, and he’ll be here in time for coffee and desert.”

* * * * *

The room was being cleared of all but the three big men, who were—as it turned out—all big men physically though Mr Osborne and Mr Snowden were each inches and a good fifty pounds shy of Mr Macpherson. As the small group was headed down the hallway, Ziggy came up and put his arm around Jake’s shoulders. “So, kid, what did you and the Scotsman talk about during lunch? Are the rest of us being cut out so you can take over the company?”

“Actually, we ended up talking about the rigors of the elite American business schools. He expressed mixed feelings about the value of that sort of education and training, but he was impressed by the ambition of the men and women who put themselves through such an ordeal when they could be earning decent money and starting to climb the corporate ladder with just a bachelor’s degree. I was surprised a little but he thinks a solid knowledge of history and literature and languages can make someone a better businessman than knowledge of just finance and technology and other technical fields. Maybe that has to do with how they think and present analyses over there in Scotland.”

“Every country is different.” Jake noticed that Bob Emerson and Ev Thornsby were paying close attention to his words. It made sense; he had been flattered by Mr McPherson’s attention and by his questioning about. . .

“Nothing about the operations or characteristics of CMBG’s operating divisions?”

“Not too much except for philosophical questions about the state of the American public school system and its affect on the quality of the workforce.”

Ziggy laughed. “Ah, so you played social philosopher? The roles a corporate executive has to take upon himself.” And he sighed in deep sorrow at his difficult lot in life, before he laughed again. “Did you tell him this country is sinking fast because people don’t read Tolstoy novels and listen to Beethoven’s late string quartets?”

The four men had made their way into Ziggy’s office and were seated at the conference table when Ev Thornsby suggested, “Why don’t we have a coffee service brought in. My nerves are as tense as can be, but I might as well aggravate them some more.” The man who carried himself with such dignity did not look at all nervous, and then he even laughed a bit more openly than Jake had ever noticed with him. “I don’t know why I would be nervous. In almost any case, I’m going out the side of the plane with a golden parachute.”

“And,” said Bob Emerson with a wink, “you’re hoping it will open.”

“I do know a few people whose benefits dwindled over the years after they’d been eased out.” Then Ev Thornsby winked back at the corporate lawyer. “A good barrister can sometimes cut down the odds of that happening. Or so I’ve been told.”

“Probably by a barrister.”

“Probably.” And then Mr Thornsby turned to Jake and smiled benevolently. “I think you have once again impressed some top executives. Mr Macpherson seemed to genuinely like you, though. . . .”

“My presentation dragged on a few minutes too long.”

“It takes practice, kid, even for a natural like you,” said Ziggy before heading towards the window. He turned halfway there, and said, “A superior officer has to cover a bit for his less experienced men and that was why I cut you a little short when I saw Mr Macpherson had already made his decision. After all, it was clear he had decided in favor of our presented view and there was no reason to risk him hearing anything that might cast doubt on that view.”

“And you know what that decision is?” Bob Emerson seemed to truly expect Ziggy to tell them what was being proposed, and perhaps debated, down the hallway.

“He has only a few choices. A competitive bid would not work so he’s not going to bother putting CMBG on the auction block by offering his stock

in one big package. He can still sell out the shares in a more disciplined manner or maybe sell them to FVTR. More likely, he'll take the same deal that's being offered to all CMBG shareholders—mostly FVTR stock with a little cash to sweeten the deal. Then, his options collapse to being a passive investor or taking an active role on the board.”

“The last option wins the prize. He'll let the new FVTR team, or the VICA team or whatever, handle a chunk of his money so long as he has some oversight,” said Jake in a voice somewhat distracted.

“Are you guessing?”

“Obviously, I don't know for sure, but I'd bet something like seats for a Rangers' game on it.”

“There wouldn't be any takers in this room, Jake. But we could agree on a corporate executive date or something like that if we're all correct in that guess.”

To Jake's surprise, it was Mr Thornsby who said, “Sounds good. I haven't been to a hockey game since Bobby Orr and Phil Esposito were still playing.”

39 Returning to Places of Romance and Lust

Mary looked around at the other diners on the upper level at Pedro's, but she saw no one who interested her. They all looked to be successful young lawyers and corporate executives. Maybe a stock-broker or even a hot-shot Rolls-Royce salesman. "Or saleslady," she said in correction of her thoughts. She traded winks with Kirsten just before the young lawyer drained her gin and tonic and put up her hand for another.

Out of the corner of her attention, Mary perceived that Jake was telling Bayard about his successful presentation a month and a half prior to Angus Macpherson and the boards of GRF and FVTR. And then she let herself hear: "So, I had them convinced at the rational level that the deal was a good one for the stockholders, implying strongly that a competitive bid would have to involve an overpayment for the companies, but people have, of course, made money when everyone thought they were overpaying at the go-in." Bayard nodded as if that were obvious, though Mary suspected he was merely collecting background impressions. "It was something of a staged show, as it turned out. Tracy and Ziggy had convinced Caleb Snowden that their best bet was simply to convince Angus Macpherson that there was a very good team in place to run the merged companies. And it worked. Macpherson is holding on to his stock and he'll be controlling a seat on the board."

Jake shot a hostile glare at Kirsten as the waiter put another gin and tonic in front of her. She sent a smile in Jake's direction and raised her glass in a toast. Bayard was the only one who raised his glass with her, though she drank a greater volume of her mixed drink than he did of his Mexican beer.

"So," and Jake caught Mary's gaze before he continued, "you and Ba-

yard's mother hit it off? Does she know..." Jake sort of pointed in the direction of Mary's belly not yet bulging but known to contain a new person. She just nodded and smiled. "Is Mrs Raines much like her social critic son?"

Mary laughed and said, "Lord, no. She's more hardheaded than I am in my hardware store mode. More hardheaded than you are when you're pricing out a possible deal."

A grin passed quickly over Jake's face and then he asked, "So you're starting it as a catalog operation?"

"Initially." Mary was looking at Bayard and wishing he would show more interest and would respond to some of these questions. He had agreed to handle the computer work, setting up the catalog and the web pages, setting up order-processing systems and keeping the books until they could hire a full-time office person. But she had seen the other books, the ones Bayard had taken out of the library to read his last few weeks in New York City: all on publishing. There had been books on handbinding, books on hot-metal typesetting, books on modern electronic typesetting. There had been books on the marketing process and about the business aspects of publishing. Those latter books had made Bayard gnash his teeth. Still...

"Will you have to store stock yourself?"

"At first we won't have any space to store any. Unless we can fit it in the closet in our apartment." Mary reached over to put her hand on Bayard's arm as if to physically connect him to her and the company she was setting up with Bayard's mother. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that Kirsten was eying the wedding band and the modest diamond ring that Mary was wearing.

"It's a nice start-up possibility." Mary was happy that Jake had turned to talk to Bayard. "The outlay will be minimal while you're basically just brokering for the master craftsmen up in northern New England. Then, if the operation grows, you'll be able to show a record of good sales to banks and you should be able to get yourself some loans on decent terms."

"Loans, not investments?"

Jake shrugged in Bayard's direction and didn't have time to answer before Kirsten spoke in her sweet and endearing voice. "The investment bankers would take everything from you if you dealt with them. You'd end up, at best, as a valued employee with a tiny share of the company. If you're talking about a hi-tech company or an oil exploration company that might be worth billions within ten years, then a small share can be nice.

For an operation like the one you're starting, it would be nothing. And you would lose control. But, because your growth might be limited, chances are you wouldn't get an investment banker to help you anyway. Your best option would be to get an investment from someone already in the business. An established furniture dealer who wanted to expand into the high-end, custom-built line. But such an investor would likely also demand a bigger share and more control than you'd wish to give up. The best way to finance these sorts of operations is with loans from family members or from a local bank after you've got a good track record even if it is short."

It was only a few minutes later that Mary saw that everyone had pretty much finished eating though her plate and that of Kirsten were far from empty. Feeling guilty that she was leaving New York City without having taken much advantage of all the opportunities, she looked up, feeling a glow coming to her face, and suggested to Jake, "Why don't we skip desert here and head for that coffee-shop where we saw Bayard that night that seems so long ago."

* * * * *

The taxi was approaching the coffee-shop when Kirsten suddenly said, "Let us out here. There's a shop I want to check out."

"I used to stroll around here when I first arrived in the City. There's not much here but leather shops and. . ." Bayard let his voice drift off and then looked away as he said, "Oh. None of my business."

"I like leather jackets and skirts."

Bayard just kind of wiggled his shoulders where he sat in front with the cabbie. "None of my business. Though I did see some real interesting implements in the windows of some of those shops. I'm just a nice boy from a middle-class community and I didn't understand how they would be used but some of them hurt just to look at them."

"You're right," responded Kirsten in a playful voice as she reached up and tweaked his cheek. "You are quite a hick."

"I said 'nice boy'."

"Nice boy. Hick. Same difference."

To Bayard's surprise, Mary went over to Kirsten's side as they exited the cab. The two women started window shopping for leather clothes. He was starting to wonder about how Mary would look in a leather skirt when Jake laughed. In a low voice, he said to Bayard, "You're right in what you're

thinking. Mary would look quite good in a tight leather skirt, though I'm not sure she would really be comfortable in one."

"What are you guys talking about?" Mary's face, when she had turned to them, was showing still more suspicion than her voice and the two men laughed before Jake said, "We're just talking about you. Take it as a compliment."

Kirsten took hold of Mary's arm and led her on towards the coffee-shop. "Just ignore them. If they bother you again, I know a good lawyer who can take care of them."

All four of them were turned towards the coffee-shop and about to move on when they noticed a car pull over to the curb on the far side of the street. A slight figure in an ankle-length goose-down parka emerged from the shadows and came over to the back-window of the car. A second later, they heard, "You want what? You'll pay for that one, mister." The whore dropped her voice for a short conversation which was still holding the attention of Jake and Mary and Bayard though Kirsten was ready to move again. And then the door to the car opened and the whore got in. The car pulled away quickly. As it drove by, it could be seen to be a Cadillac limo with a uniformed driver at the wheel.

Kirsten suspired deeply and said, "You're all from the boondocks. The way you look at something as simple as a pick-up."

For his part, Bayard contributed, "It was a different woman."

"Different woman?" asked Kirsten as if wondering if this hick had been sampling the unsanitary pleasures of the big city.

"Different from the one that night when Mary and Jake and I first saw each other in this coffee-shop." Looking up, Mary and Jake saw that they were within ten feet or so of the entrance to the coffee-shop.

"How do you know?"

"This one was strong and moved smoothly. The one that night moved in a strange way, as if she had tuberculosis in her joints as well as her lungs."

"And smack in her blood and probably little itsy bitsy retroviruses as well and all sorts of fungus and bacteria in her private parts and her throat." Kirsten's voice was not cold so much as indifferent as if it were no more than a fact of life.

Bayard turned his head and met Kirsten's gaze for a few seconds, causing her to confess, "I know I should be sympathetic. Believe it or not, I've known people, been close to people, who've had some of those terrible problems, though I haven't known anyone who had them all. There are

some pretty screwed-up rich people and I went to school with some, or the children of some, and I've been around a lot of them since then. I could even direct you to well-off women of all ages who would do anything that whore was going to do for that bastard and they would do it for free and enjoy as much degradation as you could stomach dishing out."

Bayard closed his eyes for a second and nodded his head slowly. Silence had only reigned for another second when Jake clapped his gloved hands and said, "I can see this was a good idea to come down here, but as long as we are here, how about going in and getting a hot cup of cappuchino or something?"

A few minutes, everyone was warming hands or insides with hot drinks and the women were talking about the possibility of a shopping trip to pick up one of those leather outfits when Bayard asked Jake, "So, how does everyone feel about VICA moving most of its home-office staff to Nashua?"

"A lot of people don't mind. Some don't like the idea of leaving New York City, of course, so we may see a lot of attrition, but with two large headquarters staffs merging, there is a lot of redundancy anyway. I'm even thinking about asking for a second office up in Nashua... But that's a good three years away. Our real estate people are still up there, surveying those nice lots that Baxton owns and talking to architects and building engineers."

"I don't know much about this business stuff, but it seems to me that aerospace companies have been moving south and west for decades, so it's kind of strange to be moving an aerospace support company up to New Hampshire."

"Just the support staff in the home office. And not the people who can get some substantial advantage to being in New York City. There's no way I'll ever be moved up there, though I wouldn't mind visiting. It's really not far from home and I'd like to see Dad more often. Maybe Carol and Billy as well. But they're all scattering, not just in a geographical sense..."

"You could take up skiing as an excuse," suggested Mary in an off-hand manner.

"No, thank you. It's fun I'm sure, but it doesn't excite me."

In a more serious tone, Mary told Jake, "You didn't give me a straight answer this afternoon, Jake, when I grabbed you after the meeting on the move. Did you know this was going to happen when the whole deal was first going through?"

Jake was silent for a moment and then, looking as if he were ready to

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take his medicine, he confessed, “Months ago, I had recommended moving backroom operations to a cheaper locale as one of our measures to squeeze value out of our operations. I revived the idea when we were planning for a possible fight against corporate raiders, but it was Ziggy who directed our gaze northward, maybe because he has taken up skiing. His brother-in-law and his wife are fanatic skiers and have a place somewhere in Maine.” He looked over at Bayard and said, “I’m only kidding about Ziggy moving us north because he’s a skier.”

“Then,” said Kirsten with a sigh, “you don’t know our dear friend very well. It is just the sort of thing he’d do since Caleb turned down his request for a corporate fighter-jet.”

40 Lowering the Fevers of Desires

Having mailed out the last box of catalogs, Bayard heard himself sigh in relief—to the amusement of the postal clerk. He then walked back out to his mother’s car to see her walking his way, a shopping bag in her hand. “You have a couple of hours before we have to put you on that train to New York City.”

Knowing it would do no good, Bayard protested once again, “I can just get a bus down to Boston to catch the train to New York. It doesn’t matter if I get to the City a little later.”

Mrs Raines reached over and squeezed her son’s forearm. “You’ve got a lovely wife, pregnant at that. . . You haven’t seen her for nearly three weeks. I think it should matter a lot that you get to her as soon as possible.”

“You like her, don’t you?”

“I love her as a daughter. Easy enough since she is a lovable person, though I sometimes don’t know why she puts up with you.”

Bayard froze for a minute and watched his mother get behind the wheel of her aging but well maintained Mercedes. She gave a similar impression as Mary, at least to him. They didn’t look much alike. His mother was about as tall as Mary, five, three or so, but his mother was bustier than Mary and generally heavier in her limbs. They both dressed very well, elegantly as far as he could tell, but his mother preferred flashier and brighter clothes while Mary tended to stay to blues, especially dark blues, and occasionally the brightly colored shirt—she even had a bright pink turtleneck though she said that was a terrible color for her.

Jo-anne Raines was looking out at her son as if to wonder why he wasn’t getting in the car, and then he did, telling her, “I was just comparing you and Mary.”

“Oh.” Mrs Raines looked in her mirrors, looked over her shoulder, and then pulled out of her parking space before saying, “We aren’t that much alike, except for being pretty and extremely intelligent.”

“That’s what I had concluded as well.”

“Of course, you’re intelligent enough to know a smart lady when you see one.”

“If you say so, Mom. There’s also something about your personalities, maybe the way you interact with men, that makes you very similar. I mean, besides the great beauty and the Einsteinian IQ that you have in common.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” She turned and headed down the street towards downtown before saying, “We’ll stop at the deli and you can get a sandwich and I’ll have a salad. Then we’ll head right to the apartment to make sure everything is in order for Mary’s arrival.”

“She’ll reorganize it anyway.”

“Maybe not. I had several telephone conversations with her about how she wanted things set up. She said she’ll be awfully busy for the last three weeks of working for her old company. She’s got to do a lot to help integrate Baxton into the company. Meanwhile, you can be processing orders.”

“Fortunately, I’ll have some orders to process. We’ve seen some activity on the web-site. From some of the dealers who know you. We also sold a couple of very nice pieces. A handmade desk and a handmade dining room suite.”

“To one of the dealers?”

“No, to an executive at Mary’s company. A fellow named Ziggy Robinson, if you can believe it. An ex-Marine fighter pilot and a real nice guy, though he’s as much a part of corporate America as Jake wants to be.”

Mrs Raines laughed as she pulled into the small parking lot. After turning off the car, she turned to her son and asked, “You’d like to rescue that boy from his awful fate, his moral downfall into the corporate world. Wouldn’t you?”

“I like Jake. We have sharp disagreements but we’ve never even raised our voices at each in our many debates. We’ve never said anything personally insulting, or even implying an insult. I think that’s partly because he knows more than I do about some aspects of the moral issues. And I’ve let him know I respect his knowledge and his opinions. Apparently, there were economics professors at MIT and Stanford who brought all the issues into the open, though economists end up supporting the idea that our standard of living should be measured by just numbers. At the end of their

arguments, they seem to forget that material prosperity can sometimes be gained by giving up personal freedom and the integrity of the person and by selling shoddy, second-rate goods.”

“You still talk of people invading our insides?”

“Pushing ideas into our heads.”

“That’s unavoidable to some extent, so long as we live in societies that have to have some shared ideas and feelings.”

In response, Bayard got out of the car, walked around, finished opening his mother’s door when she was already in the process of getting out. A few seconds later, they were walking towards the door of the deli. “But those shared ideas should be set according to some moral criteria, not according to some perverse idea that prosperity justifies itself. A free and morally well-formed people will be able to carry out their business activities the way they think is appropriate. Selecting a level of prosperity that balances well with their other needs. Family needs and local community and all that.”

“And all that? You seem to be working over your thoughts, Bayard, but there are still a lot of empty spaces and misleading colors.”

“Well, Mom, I didn’t spend two years at the Sorbonne studying European culture, like some people I know.”

* * * * *

Bayard gazed at Mary’s still flat belly as his head rested in her lap. He’d never paid much attention to pregnant women, certainly not to relate the changes in their bodies to the stage of their pregnancy. He was finding it fascinating to watch the changes in Mary’s body and her moods.

“Are you going to listen to me or are you just going to stare at my belly?”

Bayard reached up his hand and offered, “I could caress your belly, if you want,” but she slapped his hand away and told him, “Staring is bad enough. Now listen if you want to ever have a chance at starting that damned publishing company.”

“Years away, Goddess of Discipline and Pain.”

“That’ll be an accurate description if you don’t. . .” Mary reached down and lifted Bayard’s head. Before he could react, she had scooted out. “If you can’t pay attention in this position, let’s go work at my kitchen table.”

“The movers are coming in fifteen minutes or so.”

“Fifteen minutes will do it if you pay attention.”

Soon enough began fifteen minutes of sheer torture from the viewpoint of a man interested in educating children, interested in the moral formation of children and adults, interested in the moral structures of society, but not much interested in more practical matters such as:

“Do we really have to collect all this information? It’s kind of intrusive. I don’t like to violate people’s privacy.”

Mary looked up from her sketch of the web form Bayard was going to be creating soon. . .

“You can get this done even before we leave New York?” When he nodded, she asked, “And test it fully?”

“A browser can call up any file on your system and display it, as a web-page if it is proper HTML or calls up pieces of HTML. I can even test an entire web-site the way it would be on the Worldwide Web by creating a loopback and accessing my own home directory.”

She stared at him for a second before announcing, “I’ll take your word for it,” and then dropping her eyes to the yellow pad.

A few minutes later, they had come close to finishing when a knock came on the door. Bayard jumped up, his heart and soul feeling suddenly lighter, his mind filling up with images of northern regions.

41 Negotiations Between Partners

Mrs Raines took another sip of her coffee before glancing at Mary. Then the older woman looked off just to the side of Mary's head before saying, "I contacted some friends and got a short list of recommended obstetricians in Nashua, but some of them might not be taking on new patients right now."

Mary forced a smile and replied, "It will only take one delivery and one of them will have an opening for another patient." She sat back and rocked once in the antique rocker that Mrs Raines had brought with her as a housewarming present. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this rocker. . . Mom."

"It comes hard doesn't it." Mary forced another smile and Mrs Raines sighed and looked away before saying, "Look, I'll get out of your way in just a few minutes, but I wanted to make some business offers quickly. Bayard let it slip that you'd been offered a promotion to head of personnel if you change your mind and stay with your company, FGTN or. . ."

A slightly more relaxed smile appeared on Mary's face though she wasn't succeeding in forgetting about the headache which had been with her for nearly two days. "FVTR, but my company was CMBG and it was absorbed as a junior partner of sorts. And it might become VICA or something like that, just to confuse everybody that much more."

"Alphabet soup, but I'm used to it. Some of the design houses have become corporations with ugly and meaningless acronyms, so I deal with XJKL, Ltd or whatever on a regular basis." There was a long enough pause to cause Mary to open her eyes and look directly at her mother-in-law. "I'm willing to move down here, Mary, if you want to stay in that corporate job. I'll run the business side of things; I can move my own business down here as well, maybe have to be on the road more often since my major skill is

spotting truly worthwhile pieces under piles of dust in the attic of some farmhouse. But I had largely found and moved the good antiques from my area anyway. And, truth to tell, there are so many people looking to make their fortunes in great-grandma's attic that the business is becoming a bit harsher. Too many sharks, and the profit margins are down for those who stick to the older, more friendly ways of doing things. This business of selling handcrafted furniture through catalogs and through the Internet might be a better business to be in, for now anyways. And I wouldn't close up my antique business... I would just let it shrink to fit the supply of quality pieces."

"Are you offering to run the company with Bayard?"

Mrs Raines sighed again. "I know your heart is set on getting back into some sort of hands-on business again, but if you think you can help your family more by having a more secure income, I'll step in until you're ready to take over the business."

"How much can you lend us?"

With a smile on her face and a certain hardening around her eyes as well, Mrs Raines replied, "How quickly could you get the business up and running?"

"Running? You mean to provide Bayard and me with an adequate income and to start building up capital so we can grow?"

"Something like that. I usually go more on instinct and don't always even list my goals in great detail."

"I'll bet you've always had a damned good idea what your most important goals were and how you were going to reach them." Mary's voice softened as she asked, "Was Bayard's father a lot like him?"

"He gave up the ministry in the days when congregations were becoming less worried about paying their pastors a decent income. He did it for me; I wanted to start a family when I was young, but Bayard didn't come for another few years and he was the..."

"So, he became a teacher."

"Eventually a principal, though he hated administration. I do have a chunk of money set aside. I certainly don't need all of it for my retirement. I already own a very nice home, my lake-side vacation home, and a couple of nice cars."

"Which are aging?"

"They'll probably outlast my skills as a driver." The two women locked eyes and Mrs Raines offered, "I can buy you a nice house by the end of

the year. I don't want to liquidate too much at one time, especially with the stock markets so low. But I want to help the two of you as much as possible. After all, I love Bayard and he's my only heir. I might as well give him some of the estate when he needs it, because I intend to live long enough to see the two of you quite prosperous."

Mary leaned forward, placing her elbows on her knees, though that was already a somewhat uncomfortable position despite her lack of an obvious belly. Cupping her hands, she gave rest to her chin and cheeks and looked directly at her mother-in-law, though in a manner a bit soft, almost that of a daughter pleading with her mother. "\$50,000 should see us through, and we don't need it all at once of course, since it will be for our ongoing expenses for the first year and a half to two years."

Mrs Raines motioned to Mary. "Come sit beside me," and seemed very pleased when Mary did just that. "I'll arrange my investments so I can give you up to \$100,000 for your family use over the next two years. That's on top of the \$300,000 I can get tax-free from selling my house and the land around it. That'll buy you and Bayard a house. With an in-law suite attached. Or, I'll buy a small ranch-house down the street if you prefer."

Mary tried to show her gratitude in her smile but feared she mainly showed her exhaustion. Between the demands the baby was making on her body and the demands of the new business before she'd even finished up her work integrating Baxton's personnel operations into those of CMBG which were in turn being integrated into...

"Neither of those living arrangements is acceptable. You'll live in the house as one of the family, though you can certainly have a suite for a little privacy and quiet. Only a little. If you're going to be in a house with a baby, you'll have to suffer a little. There's some sort of rule about that though I'm not sure where it's written down."

The older woman smiled brightly. "As for your business needs, I'll pull out all my papers and see how much I can use for this new business we're starting, but I'm sure I can come up with at least \$500,000 though it may take five years or more to liquidate it without being massacred by the IRS."

Mary smiled and took the older woman's right hand in both of hers. "Don't you dare even think of selling that lakeside property. I hope to be taking my vacations there for the next forty years."

Taking her free hand, Mrs Raines patted Mary's hands while smiling. "Not necessary. I think I've been talking stingy, but I was worried about throwing my money into something when I didn't know you. And I know

my son well enough to know how his attention is likely to wander from something like a furniture sales business.”

Mary smiled and then leaned over and kissed her mother-in-law on the top of her dropped head all the while thinking that life was looking pretty good. Getting the family and family business going would involve. . .

“Hard work is all that’s left, Mom. And I’ve never been afraid of hard work. Even when it’s something I don’t really enjoy, but when it’s something fun like this handcrafted furniture business. . .”

“So, you’re turning down the offer from your company?”

“Mostly. I’ll stay another six months to help in the move, but then I’ll be working full-time alongside you and Bayard.”

“No, then you’ll be near delivery or taking care of a very young baby. A month or so after that, you’ll be able to start work on your computer at home while Bayard puts in the long hours on the catalogs and computer, filling orders and keeping the data. And I’ll take care of the road-work and start mining my contacts with design houses and big-city furniture dealers. I’ll introduce you to all those people as soon as possible. And, when I’m at home, I can help Bayard with the paperwork, maybe relieve him a little so he can start working on that book he’s talking about or that publishing company he’s no longer talking about.”

Bayard walked in the room just then and looked suspiciously at his mother and his wife sitting close together and holding hands. Mary just showed him the most innocent smile she could manage.

Part VII
Moving On

42 The Desire to Be Less Desirable

Another year and a half passed to find Jake looking over the lake behind the cottage belonging to Jo-anne Raines. It seemed almost too peaceful and blue. Nothing was seen disturbing the landscape except for Mary and Kirsten in kayaks about a hundred yards down the shore-line. “Your mother never rents this place out?”

An unexpected pause led Jake to look over to see Bayard with his beer can at his lips and his throat working to swallow. Another second or two passed before, “No, it’s just for family use. We have the business pretty well-funded, and we plan to keep this place.”

“Nice. Does she own much land besides the lot?”

“About 800 feet of beach front and eleven acres or so on the other side of the road.”

“She’ll be popular with the developers some day.”

“She’ll never sell. If Mary and I can manage it, we’ll never sell either. At least not the cabin and the beachfront. The land on the other side of the road might go someday, but there are too many memories here. Of Dad and...” Bayard was silent for a couple of seconds before he said, “Beatrice.”

“Who was she?”

“The daughter of a friend of my mother. The parents both died in a plane crash and Beatrice died of leukemia when she was just twelve. I was fifteen at the time.”

“Your parents adopted her?”

“My mother. My father had died the year before.”

Jake just nodded. “And Mary had told me that all of your grandparents had died when you were young.”

“Two of them died before I was born.”

“Must have been lonely in some ways. I grew up in a pretty full house—six of us, and there were five housesful of cousins within a fifteen minute walk of my parents’ house. And all four of my grandparents were alive and living within a short drive when I was young.”

Bayard laughed. “No wonder you’re comfortable in large organizations.”

“Ah, a social determinist. An incipient Marxist even if you don’t use the language yet.”

Bayard didn’t laugh along with Jake. A serious expression came over his bearded face and he claimed, “I guess it’s not so much incorporation that bothers me. . . .”

“Incorporation or encorporation?” asked Jake with a smile before he took a sip of his beer and then set it down on the ground, his eyes still looking over the lake.

“I don’t know. I remember that conversation we had in New York and I was trying to distinguish between consciously being folded into a group, a corporation, and unconsciously being folded in from the inside. Or something like that. I just don’t think all people enter the corporate life of our world by a process which quite matches the dictionary definition of ‘incorporate’. There are at least two processes, one working from the outside in and the other working from the insides of compliant people and working its way out. Not that I can really describe either process very well.”

“And it’s probably even more complex and complicated than that anyway.”

Bayard turned and looked at Jake, trying to peer deeply inside of him, but then he quickly stopped an effort so offensive to his own beliefs in the sacredness of a person’s insides, but. . .

“What really bothers me is that we, and our ancestors in the past three or four generations, have just let a particular form of corporate economy develop without an conscious effort to even aim at moral goals.”

“You want to plan the Good Society?”

“No, I’ve always known that’s impossible. . . . If I hadn’t, you would have convinced me. You’ve changed my thoughts more than you might realize.” Bayard felt surprised at the embarrassment he felt at that admission, but he went right on talking: “Any society does shape itself, it’s just a question of how its done. But you shape marketplaces and streets of justice, you even nourish or starve the family, by the laws you adopt and the way you enforce them. Even ideas, though they creep up on you, should be somewhat in view

at any given time. People have no excuse for unconsciously adopting ideas over time when those ideas are so despicable they would have been rejected if proposed right out front at the beginning. That's true of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s and it's also true of this country which has gradually changed laws and ideas so that corporations have more power and more rights than families and churches. And, now, without many people being aware of what has happened, those corporations, staffed by decent people, are exploiting children, selling all sorts of trash that no parent should allow into the house."

"We've had versions of this conversation before and I'll say what I said then: if that's true, it's not an argument against corporate forms of business organization. It's also not a direct argument against big government or television or public schools. There are no state policemen going around making sure that public schools work so hard to dumb children down. There aren't propaganda ministries getting people to favor Mariah Carey to Dawn Upshaw or forcing them to buy up shelves-full of books by Stephen King and Danielle Steele while *Moby Dick* just sits there until some teacher assigns it to his class. I had trouble recently getting hold of a copy of *Gargantua* which I had decided to read because of a cocktail conversation, of all things." He smiled almost sadly as he looked out on the two women paddling around aimlessly. "Kirsten's Aunt Sophia is a professor of history at Columbia and she was talking about the way that books do change history sometimes and sometimes its the books that seem to have anything but serious intent which turn out to be the deepest."

"*Gargantua*?"

"A dirty book. Of sorts. By Rabelais. Sixteenth century or so."

"A dirty book?"

"Well, I hear tell that Rabelais was trying to tie men back down to their bodies and to their world, and Aunt Sophia says the Enlightenment pagans were even less amused than the pious prudes."

Bayard looked down into the lake with its reflection of a surrounding forest. And then he looked up into the blue sky with but a few clouds racing across. As if by its own volition, his right hand rose in front of him, not to block the sun which was behind him; the hand was offering itself for his inspection. "Sometimes parts of me seem quite strange and alien but I've never had too much trouble getting in touch with my animal body, as you could call it. I don't have much trouble with the world either. I know it's my home, but not a perfect home and perhaps a better home lies ahead.

My problem has always been connecting to other people. Not one-to-one. I have few problems there. I'm actually quite sociable in most ways, but I've never felt comfortable with the institutions we've built up or the way you relate to people when dealing with them through public institutions."

"A lot of people probably wouldn't feel comfortable if they really stopped and thought about their lives, but that's why so many people can lead the lives they do. They'll give up freedom and culture and good taste just because they don't want to think."

"I know. You've convinced me people don't really want to be free, but I think they can be moved in the right direction, towards freedom and a more demanding morality. I don't know how, but I'm pretty sure it's happened before."

Jake was nodding his head when Bayard felt something soft hit him in the back of the head. Jake laughed and reached behind Bayard to retrieve a multi-colored caterpillar which squeaked as it was picked up. "I think young Wendell has finished emptying his play-pen and is looking for new worlds to conquer."

"That was fast. He was sound asleep and curled up with Teddy the last time I turned around."

Little Wendell, only eleven months old, gave a scream and then stopped immediately as his father rose and went to fetch him. Setting the little fellow on the ground, Bayard found himself sprinting as Wendell headed right for the lake, his arms out in the direction of that wonderful blue stuff, but, only seconds later, the young father found himself leaping over the young boy who'd stopped on a dime to examine something on the ground.

"He found himself a nice bug, I'll bet."

Shaking his head, Bayard told Jake, "He's a budding biologist but I think he'd rather be down there living with them instead of studying them. He's even more impressed with the life of a dog and stares sometimes when the deer pass through the backyard in the early morning. I think he wishes he were going off to share their life as well."

"He hasn't settled on his career yet. That's normal for a young boy to oscillate between cowboy or fireman, bug or dog."

While he was trying to herd Wendell in the direction of Jake, Bayard shook his head again and said, "He's just not interested in the life of a human being, so far as I can tell. He's also fascinated by the eagles and hawks and owls that go fishing in this lake or mousing in the meadows on the other side of the road."

Jake finished the dregs of his beer and placed the bottle on the ground before leaning back on his elbows and staring out over the water. “This is the life. At least for a while.”

Bayard laughed and then raised his hand to the sky before speaking deeply and dramatically: “And then, after recharging his batteries, the warrior of corporate finance will return to the never-ending struggle.”

“Yeah, but I’m still working on the title. Warrior of corporate finance is okay. But warrior of corporate capitalism might be more accurate in some ways. At least it will play to the theorists and historians. Some quiet Sunday when I’m watching a football game, I’ll write down a lot of possibilities and then make a pick during half-time.”

“So, is Ziggy still rolling along?”

“You haven’t been in contact with him for a while?”

“Not for six months or better. Since he bought that hand-made desk for his brother-in-law when he was elected to the state senate down in Pennsylvania.”

“That’ll eventually show up in some claim that Norman is in the pocket of corporate interests.”

Bayard thought for just a second before correcting Jake: “No, he’s in the desk-drawer of corporate interests.” And then there was silence for a good number of seconds. . .

The silence was broken by Wendell’s scream of joy and somehow he got loose from his father who set out in a sprint after the young boy. Bayard had picked Wendell up before he saw that there was a raccoon in the shadows. . .

When he returned to Jake’s side, Bayard announced proudly, “His vision is getting a lot more acute. He picked out a raccoon moving in the shade over there and a lot of adults have trouble doing that.”

“If he really wants to be a dog, maybe he smelled the thing.”

“Maybe, but at least he hasn’t grown a tail to wag yet.”

“He might be working on that.” Jake rose and went to the cooler where he fetched two more beers.

When Jake came back, Bayard accepted the can of beer without a word and then looked out to make sure Mary and Kirsten were still far out on the water. “I’ll understand if you refuse to answer, Jake, but I have to ask you this. Out of concern for you. Did you give up your relationship with Charlotte?”

Jake stared out over the lake and was silent for so long that Bayard thought he was refusing to answer, but then. . .

“That was part of the deal.”

“Deal?”

“When Kirsten agreed to go out to the Betty Ford Clinic. Which she didn’t quite do, but that was because her mother was out there before Kirsten could book a flight. So, she ended up in a similar place in Connecticut, which was harder on all of us, especially me, since it was so close but they didn’t want me to visit her for the first two weeks out of the month she was there. They had reserved the option of recommending she stay for longer, but she was put on probation, so to speak. And she has been good about AA meetings. . . You’re lucky she hasn’t started talking about their ten-step religion so far. She also sees a therapist, and sometimes I go with her. It’s a no-nonsense woman who used to be a drill sergeant in the Marines, appropriately enough. Very likeable woman, but she doesn’t let that get in the way of doing her job.”

“That’s an interesting way of phrasing that. ‘Very likeable woman, but she doesn’t let that get in the way of doing her job.’ Mary’s teasing me into writing a novel now that the business is going pretty well and she’s more or less back to work full-time. With the docking station for her laptop in the nursery and another one in the playroom. And she and Wendell are participating in a good play-group. Five mothers with a total of eight children. It takes at least two of the women at a time to handle them, and Mary gets the worse of the deal for now, since Wendell’s relatively young and. . .”

Wendell squirmed out of his father’s grasp and headed for the water. A short sprint after the young lad and a walk back and Bayard was laughing the entire way. “I guess he’s catching up to the others.”

“You seem to be settled down into this quiet family life.”

“Well, quiet compared to 42nd Street at midnight, maybe. But we have to keep moving. And I really haven’t had too much time for all the studying and writing I want to do.”

“But maybe you have a better perspective on life now.”

“Yeah, and returning to church helped a bit. It reminded me that Christianity is partly about incorporating ourselves into the church, the Body of Christ. And I guess some similar things can be said about any major religion.”

“So, you’re no longer opposed to incorporation, of one sort or another?”

“I’m no fan of the particular types of incorporation allowed by the laws of this country. I think extending personal rights to corporate entities was

a morally despicable thing to do. And it has greatly endangered the rights of individuals as well as the integrity of the family, at least the extended family.”

Jake was silent once more for a long pause before he spoke in a soft voice: “That’s at least an arguable proposition and some of the greatest defenders of the free-market have admitted we may have allowed our concern for prosperity to endanger the moral structures of our society. And, if I recall correctly, Joseph Schumpeter, the Austrian economist who ended at Harvard after fleeing the Nazis, said that the foundations of the economic theory of free enterprise were built by men who lived in times when families were strong.”

“And theories assuming free people and free markets made more sense when people were raised to have stronger beliefs and better moral habits?”

“That follows if you have faith in the goodness of life in a strong family. Yes, I think Schumpeter himself believed that, Bayard.”

* * * * *

“So did Jake tell you about my little stay in a dry-out clinic in Connecticut?”

Mary put her paddle in the water and moved it very gently, just enough to move her right alongside Kirsten. “No, but I’m guessing you were there in March.”

“Why are you guessing that?”

“He seemed pretty lonely.” Kirsten passed her a questioning glance and Mary explained, “He and Bayard had quite an extended debate about some moral issue, on e-mail. And he called us three or four times that month. *And* he visited us. He and Ziggy were up here for some meetings with department heads. Something to do with annual budgets. And they stayed over our place on Friday night. Just as well because they both got. . .”

“Loaded.” Kirsten laughed in a strange way though it wasn’t quite bitter, but it wasn’t quite pleasant, certainly not to Mary’s ears. “You can say it. Jake is good about not drinking around me. For now. My therapist said she really doesn’t think I’m the sort who will fall back into drinking binges if I have an occasional drink. She said some people do better if they learn how to drink very moderately and only on special occasions. On the other hand, she said I might also fall into the state of genteel alcoholism if

I don't watch out. She spoke about Walker Percy and got me to read his novels. Did you ever read anything by him?"

"A long time ago. It was kind of strange. Vines growing all over everything and people making love in sand-traps. Or something like that."

Kirsten laughed. "Sounds like maybe *Love in the Ruins*, but some of his other novels had similar stuff about vines growing over abandoned buildings or over roads. I don't know if you know, but Percy was a psychiatrist as well as a depressive novelist and he used to work all day, go home and drink gin-and-tonics or something until he was loaded and then go to bed. He claimed it was a very reasonable thing to do when you live in a world like ours."

"I hope you don't fall into that sort of attitude. Because I'd hate to see you get into... I mean, you have your work—which you love. You have Jake—whom you love even more..."

"Sometimes. When he's not annoying me too much."

"You still love him then. I know because there are times when Bayard pushes me to the point of not liking him, but even then I still love him dearly."

"I guess so."

Kirsten looked a bit down and Mary thought about holding back her curiosity but...

The two women started paddling again, heading vaguely towards the shore where Jake and Bayard and Wendell were sitting. "You know, Kirsten, Bayard and I were wondering..."

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"He gave up his girl-friend." When Mary stopped dead in the water and her jaw dropped a little. Kirsten looked surprised. "Didn't you know he had a girl-friend?"

"Charlotte?"

"So you did know."

"I knew nearly two years ago when he met her on the very same day he met you and had trouble deciding between the two of you. And I knew he continued to see her after you two were engaged. But I thought he gave her up after you got married."

"He took up with her again after a short vacation. I felt sorry for her. Didn't blame her much. And didn't even blame Jake much, considering the situation and considering what I'd seen in my own family. Except for

Uncle Kevin and Aunt Sheila—sweetest and most bourgeois couple to ever live in an eighteen room mansion in Greenwich.” Kirsten started to paddle as if to leave Mary’s side but she turned and looked her companion in the eye to tell her, “Charlotte is a sweet thing from what I understand, but she had fallen for Jake and she is one of those women who have no will of their own when it comes to a man they love.” Kirsten laughed loudly and said, “I certainly don’t have that problem. And neither do you.”

“No, I guess I’m pretty hardheaded and strong-willed.”

“In your own quiet way, you are quite hardheaded and strong-willed.” Kirsten looked away for a few seconds, but then she turned quickly to look at Mary in a manner that seemed a bit defiant. “So, I guessed wrong. What *were* you and Bayard wondering?”

“We were just wondering if you and Jake had decided to start a family. I mean it’s none of my business, so feel free. . .”

“We had decided to start a family shortly after we got married last June.” Kirsten winked at Mary and told her, “It was you that did it when you showed up for the wedding. You looked so cute with your belly bulging. . .”

“And my veins were also bulging as I recall. And I was pretty cute each morning as I leaned over the toilet to eject my midnight snack.”

Kirsten smiled in a politely distracted manner, but that expression quickly froze into a grimace. “My doctors and my therapist changed my mind about having children. For now. I might try to get pregnant this fall.” She turned to Mary and grinned before saying, “If Jake is a good boy, I might let him be the father.”

* * * * *

Kirsten stopped slicing into the watermelon and watched Jake as he walked away from the picnic table talking on his cell-phone. She went back to slicing and distributing the melon and sat down with Mary and Bayard as Jake remained in the shade of a grove of white-pines near the lake. When they finished, Jake was still off near the lake, the phone was still to his ear and mouth. Mary rose and stretched and then asked, “Anyone for iced-tea?”

Bayard shook his head and pointed towards the beer he’d been nursing through the barbecue lunch, but Kirsten said, “Sure. And bring one for the corporate warrior. He’ll need the refreshment if he and Ziggy are preparing

to enter battle again.” And then she shook her head as if in wonder at the behavior of her husband.

Mary had just returned with a pitcher of iced-tea and a stack of glasses when Jake made his way back to the table. “That was Ziggy, if you didn’t hear. Someone is making a run at the company. Bill Clemens is involved again, but this time there’s lots of money and the potential investors are said to be less cautious and less scrupulous than Angus Macpherson. They’ve made good offers for MacLaurin’s shares in VICA and for the Livingston Trust’s shares as well.”

Bayard laughed a little but there was a nasty edge to the sound. “So, it just goes on and on.”

With some confusion showing on his face, Jake looked at Bayard but remained silent for a moment before confessing, “Yes, I guess it does go on.”

“With no break to give people time to live more truly human lives.”

Jake shrugged. “I guess this competition for control of the resources of the world is what some of us think to be a truly human life.”

“Well,” and Bayard’s voice grew softer and sadder when he ended his own pause to say, “it would be nice if you could live those truly human lives without changing the societies which the rest of us have to live in.”

Colophon

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